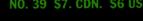
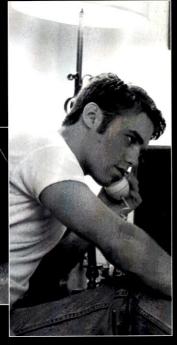
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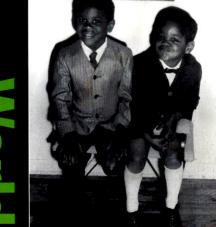








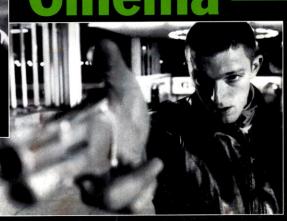




Contemporary









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THE COLLECTIVE

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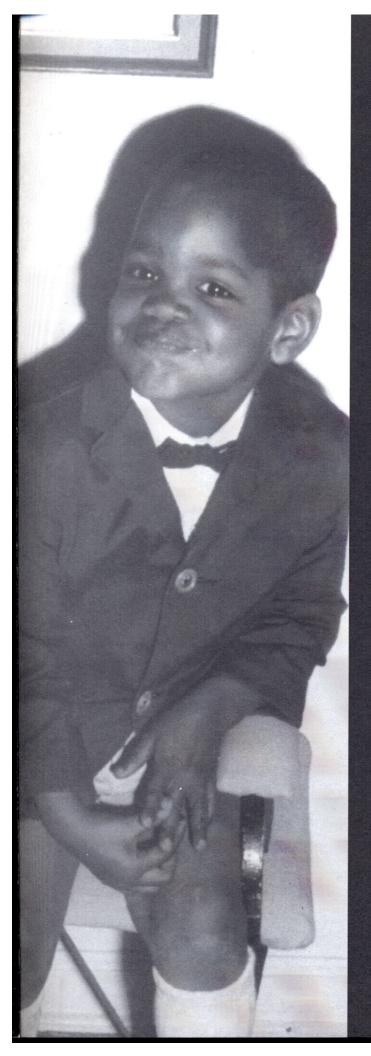
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Vintage: Families of Value



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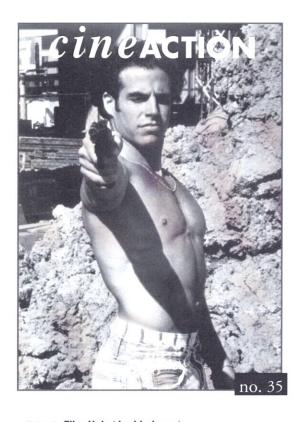
The articles and reviews collected in this issue range around the globe to films and filmmakers of many different national cinemas, from Hollywood to what is called the Third World. Some are well known, others relatively new to wider audiences and critical discussions. It is the collaborative effort of all the members of the editorial collective and also includes a number of other contributors. The articles do not attempt a thematic or aesthetic overview of global cinematic culture but consider films of diverse forms and genres: thrillers, road movies and comedies, contemporary re-workings of art cinema, experimental work and short dramas. The films address a wide spectrum of social and political issues and provoke audience expectations in multiple and intriguing ways. They are considered here from a variety of perspectives and critical interests.

This eclectic tour through such a broad representation of new work from around the world is made possible by the Toronto

representation of new work from around the world is made possible by the Toronto International Film Festival. The festival gives us the opportunity to view and reflect on hundreds of films, from glitzy openings to specific programmes of films which receive little commercial distribution - from Africa, from Latin America and from across Canada. As critics and fans, it is an annual feast of spectatorship that remains invaluable to us.

Regretfully, this issue also marks the departure of long-time collective member, Kass Banning. She has resigned from *CineAction*, to focus on other writing projects. We thank her for her many years of work, critical contributions and enthusiasm.

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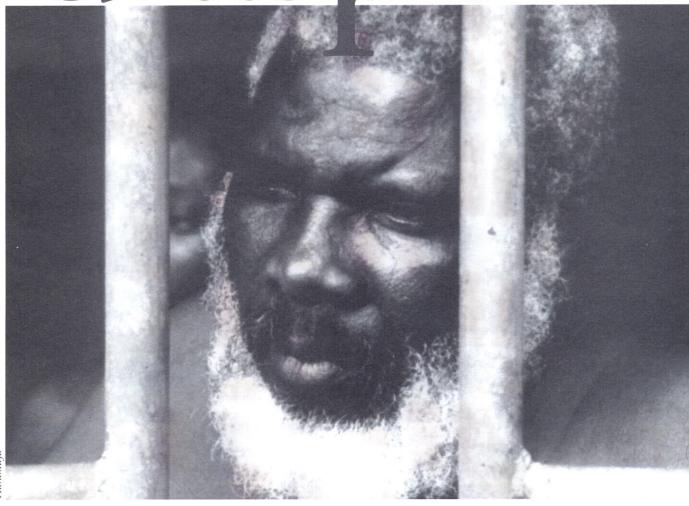
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diaspina



Toronto International Film Festival Inaugurates Planet Africa Programme

by Warren Crichlow





Vintage: Families of Value

This year was particularly historic for the Toronto Festival, it marked not only a significant anniversary in the Festival's history, but also celebrated the centenary of cinema. More than four hundred features and shorts were shown during the Festival's two weeks, distinctly attesting to the medium's remarkable transformation. The Festival offered a range of depictions of black experience, from gala openings of Carl Franklin's *Devil in a Blue Dress* (starring Denzel Washington), to South African Darrell James Root's *Cry, the Beloved Country* (starring James Earl Jones, Richard Harris, Charles S. Dutton), to Canadian Clement Virgo's stylistic first feature, *Rude*. Overall, an impressive range of films underscored the place of cinema as one of the most influential art forms of the twentieth century. Indeed, films screened at the Toronto Festival affirm the creative power of cinema to entertain, inform, and challenge, offering provocative images of self and other.

The inauguration of Planet Africa, a new permanent programme devoted to showcasing African and African diasporic film, was additional cause for celebration. Planet Africa elevates the presence and recognition of black authored cinema—globally. While sharing the Festival's traditional programme objectives of showcasing Canadian films through the Perspective Canada series and Latin American and Asian programs, for example, Planet Africa's scope is wider. Acknowledging thirty years of African cinema, the inaugural Planet Africa programme offered four independent films by prominent French-speaking West African filmmakers (including Mali's Cheick Oumar Sissoko and Burkina Faso's Drissa Toure) and five by filmmakers speaking from the diasporas of the United Kingdom and the United States. Judging by this years crop, Planet Africa promises to present films that will spark dialogue across the geographic and linguistic mélange of black world experience.



What My Mother Told Me

Planet Africa conceives of African cinema in both specific and cosmopolitan terms. African cinema here is defined by film produced, directed, photographed and edited by Africans, featuring African actors speaking in their local languages. Globally, however, Planet Africa valorizes Africa's expansion beyond the shores of the continent, evidenced by the presence of African people across all national borders. Diasporic experience is reflected in the diversity of contemporary themes and formal styles found in the contemporary films assembled by Planet Africa. Traditions of African and African diasporic filmmaking spring from the deep well of African people's creativity, their appropriation of modern technology and importantly, the chronicle of social protest.

Cinematic images of Africa have been dominated by a history of filmmaking rooted in ethnography-influenced documentary that commenced at the turn of the century. Africa and its people continue to be imaged in popular exotic representations like television's Tarzan, comic melodramas like, The Gods Must be Crazy (1984), or the current Jim Carrey buffoonery, Ace Ventura: When Nature Calls. The films of Planet Africa not only fly in the face of these derisive representations but present much richer, complex and nuanced depictions of individual and collective life, the culmination of thirty years of hard fought for African-based imaging.

Cinema's history is intimately connected with the past one hundred year experience of African peoples and their dispersion around the globe. Slavery, colonization, Jim Crow, and decolonization are potent reservoirs of historic memory from which visual representations of African peoples have been presented, interpreted, struggled over, and transformed. In both Africa and America, cinematography helped technologize the specious construction of the "black" image. All-too-familiar demeaning and distorted images of African people by white motion picture pioneers generated vital black protests movements. First generation cinematography by race-conscious and technologically innovative black filmmakers challenged European ideals and aesthetics of race and nation.

Historians of African cinema estimate that films were shown in African colonies almost as soon as the technology was invented. British-made films were seen in Southern African colonies as early as 1896. Within a year, the first fiction film shot to exotize colonial Africa for European audiences is credited to the French inventor, George Méliès, who made *The Comic Moslem* (1897) and *Ali Barbouyou and Ali Bouf in Oil*, (1903) to name but a few. Although prints of these films have not survived, Melies' films (along with those of his oftcited more realist-based countrymen, the Lumière brothers) demarcate the beginning of the subsequent spurious treatment of the African. An indigenous

African cinema did not fully come into existence until the post-war years, particularly with the Senegalese father of African cinema, Ousmane Sembene's *Borom Saret* (1963), and seminal feature *Black Girl/La Noir de...* (1966). However, the earliest African film endeavor can be traced back to the Cairo-based Egyptian, Widad Urfi, who co-directed *Laila* in 1927 with an Italian.

In America, Thomas Edison's 1896 break-through introduction of large-screen projection accelerated mass audience access to movies. Ironically, this same year witnessed the U.S. Supreme Court's momentous ruling on "separate but equal" racial segregation, Plessy vs. Ferguson. While the segregationist racial context of this century set severe limitations on African-American life chances, a resourceful generation of young black men began to experiment with the new technology. William Foster, for example, made the first black film, The Pullman Porter (1910), a derivative effort reflecting the then popular Keystone comic genre that extended vaudeville into film. However, it was the influential yet notoriously racist 1915 film by D.W. Griffith, Birth of a Nation, that energized black American cinema. Emmett J. Scott's rebuttal to Griffith (among outcries from the NAACP and more visceral reactions on the streets of Boston and Philadelphia), Birth of a Race (1919), exemplifies early social protest black filmmaking.

Today, black diasporic film explores a broader context of visual story-telling; protest is just one among many expansive forms of black cinematic expression. Decidedly poignant yet in-your-face, contemporary black cinema remains confrontational, offering both soul-searching probes into our communities and imaginative exegeses on our existence. Initiated and programmed by Festival veteran and Toronto film critic Cameron Bailey, Planet Africa responsibly captures this range of socially conscious and entertaining film. Bailey's insistence that African film needs to be made accessible in North America proved apropos, successfully drawing responsive audiences to seven days of screenings that weaved African continental films together with African American, black British and Caribbean located films. Planet Africa films encouraged subtle remembrances of Atlantic journeys, arrivals, and encounters, linking an older heritage with current realities and cultural possibilities.

African past and future as present are sagely communicated in diasporian film through urgent themes of home, family and power. Cheick Oumar Sissoko's Guimba (winner of FESPACO'S grand prize), a lusciously executed allegorical portrait of tyranny, corruption and sexual power, speaks back from pre-colonial Africa to today's political turbulence. Three other films situated in England, Jamaica, and Trinidad summon up the vicissitudes of childhood and growing-up in and

on the borders of family and community. Robert Bangura's Sidney's Chair delightfully conjures the context of race and an inter-racial child's wonderment; set during the 1967 shooting of To Sir With Love, the film utilizes Sidney Poitier's on-set chair as its through-line, while troping on the film's location—a local London neighborhood in transition. Daughter-love is the subject of Caribbean-situated Tanya Hamilton's impressive debut The Killers and Francis-Anne Solomon's What My Mother Told Me. Both films explore effects of migration (and sometimes return) on girl childhood and adolescence, depicting dynamics of exile and longing in small Jamaican and Trinidadian towns-and illustrating that one can but also cannot go home again. A raw, but always real look at U.S. gay and lesbian siblings in Thomas Allen Harris', Vintage: Families of Value reinforces the fact that the family, in all its variegated forms, remains crucial to black life.

At the same time other films in the program show how economic migration, and urbanization in particular, rub against family and community cohesion. West African-based Drissa Toure's Harumuya, and Djibril Diop's The Franc, for example, examine the cost of modernity—the will to cash-craziness and its sometimes maddening or mad-producing outcomes—in the dense urban settings of Ouagadougou and Dakar to hilarious effects. Redemption from modernity, these films suggest, is found in a return to more communal ways of living. Idrissa Ouedrago's Africa, My Africa, offers a more somber representation of modernity's insistent pressures. Part extended public service announcement about safe-sex in the age of AIDS, this film deploys music and narrative to follow an aspiring singer's journey from his rural Ivory coast village for the big city of Abidjan to struggle for a career. Closer to home, Joe Brewster's The Keeper, with a stellar cast (Giancarlo Espisito, Issach de Bankole and Regina Taylor), offers a more nuanced take on African American identity through the character of Paul, a Brooklyn prison guard, who befriends an inmate. This thoughtful film contrasts with the "ghettocentric" version of black urban experience that has come to predominate Hollywood cinematic representations. Much like fellow African American independent director, Charles Burnett (To Sleep With Anger, 1990), Brewster turns down the volume a bit to give folks time to think about the interiors of self and community. Given the dire state of independent film distribution, especially of black independents, it is doubtful that The Keeper (and other films in the program) will reach local theatres.

Hence the significance of Planet Africa. This annual showcase enables films from the diaspora to be screened in a context committed to exhibiting and critically discussing new cinematic work. Validation of the

fact of "blackness" exceeds geographic borders, and this programme provides significant exposure of black filmmakers and products to distributors of non-formulaic, independent representations of African diasporic life. Planet Africa affords opportunities for these artists to crack entrenched barriers to distribution and to bring it all "home," be it on video, TV screens or, if we're lucky enough to have them, alternative theatre venues in our communities. The broad inclusivity of this program assures that an earnest dialogue across the space/time cartography of black cinematic art has begun in Toronto and will continue. For audiences in North America, it offers an alternative to the long reigning existing depictions of naturalized black life promulgated by dominant imagery, be it Hollywood, the CBC, Telefilm, or otherwise. Planet Africa's inauguration is timely. Be it community pressure, corporate altruism, or gett'n on board the fashionable diasporic train, regardless, its presence is a welcome addition to a burgeoning black film culture that came to fruition in Toronto (and elsewhere) in the 80's. Perhaps exposure to international product will work against the influence of tired U.S. "hood"-inspired films as blueprints for young black Canadian filmmakers. At least for ten days Toronto has got the goods, Diasporic, that is.

This article benefitted from research provided by Toronto-based film critic, Kass Banning.

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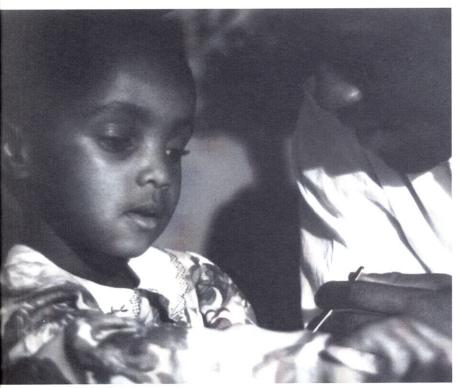
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Planet Africa: three shorts



What My Mother Told Me

by **Robert K. Lightning**

rouping together the three short films, Sidney's Chair, The Killers and What My Mother Told Me (all part of the festival's Planet Africa program of films from the African diaspora) demonstrates what intelligent programming can realize in a festival setting: the opportunity to compare different treatments of a theme. Something of the films' interrelatedness is suggested by the fact that two are coming-of-age narratives, two deal with problematic mother-daughter relationships and in two, family dynamics are coloured by interracial relationships. If the final effect of the three films (set in the UK, Jamaica and Trinidad respectively) is of variations on a theme, that theme is Oedipal relations.

Roberto Bangura's *Sidney's Chair* (UK) offers the simplest proposition - or rather allows a complex issue a simplified resolution. On one level, a charming reconstruction of 60's England during the filming of *To Sir With Love* (the title refers to Sidney Poitier), the film is concerned primarily with a young man's negotiation of the Oedipus complex. His feelings toward his parents (love for the mother, antagonism toward the father) are intensified because she is white and he is black. As in Sirk's *Imitation of Life*, the film reveals the reciprocal effect of race on Oedipal dynamics within the nuclear family. Thus, conventional family roles (nurturing mother, harsh father) facilitate the son's adoption of white cultural norms (identifying with the mother's whiteness rather than her racial transgression) and white racial myths intensify hatred of the father. The film concludes with the son achieving identification with the father and thus accepting his own blackness. The problem is that what works well enough in terms of race surreptitiously naturalizes the Oedipus, as if it were simply a matter of coming to love the patriarch. Bangura provides a happy ending with parents, son and even rebellious teenaged daughter forming a united front, of the three shorts, the only one to reach such a conclusion.



Sidney's Chair

Perhaps the finest of the three films, Tanya Hamilton's *The Killers* (USA) presents the Oedipal passage of an adolescent girl, abandoned by her mother to the care of her grandparents. Rather than rejecting the mother (who has promised to return when she can again "face" her parents), the daughter longs for her return. In fact, her own transgressive behaviour suggests she has made of the mother, a unique identification figure: Woman as rebel. Such an object choice implies a rejection of the two identities made possible by her respective grandparents: domesticated woman and woman as imitation male.

The film's concern with mother-daughter relations is enormously enriched by showing the effect of the woman's absence on two generations, juxtaposing the daughter's longing with the grandmother's growing resolve that her daughter won't return. They in turn are juxtaposed with another family, one in which the absent mother regularly sends gifts home, the custodial grandmother wholeheartedly approves of her daughter and the granddaughter is a conventional good girl. However, the "success" of these relationships suggest that the gift giving is a form of continuing obeisance to the family, which has facilitated the granddaughter's accession to the role of domesticated woman.

The respective responses of grandmother and transgressive granddaughter to the dying grandfather epitomize the girl's unreformed desires: while grandmother exhaustedly ministers to the dying patriarch, granddaughter engages a folk remedy (which allows her to demonstrate her skill at capturing lizards), not for love of the patriarch, but for fear that the mother's promise cannot literally be fulfilled should he die. However, as patriarchy demands, the girl must give up the mother as object choice and eventually this is brutally achieved, Hamilton conveying a sense of lost possibilities through a final image of the girl engaged in an act of futile aggression.

During the Q & A session that followed the screening of What My Mother Told Me (UK), director Frances-Anne Solomon noted that cast and crew strongly identified with the film's story of the reunion of a mother and daughter and that, she thus considered the script a collaborative effort. Her film (along with The Killers) would seem



to confirm the relevance to a significant amount of women of its theme: the problematizing of the mother/daughter bond by patriarchal capitalism. Here a young woman returns to Trinidad to bury the father who raised her and encounters the mother she has not known since childhood. Over an extended stay, the daughter's shield of sophisticated disinterest dissolves as she confronts the past. As much as the preceding films, this is a coming of age story, but one in which the adult protagonist not only reacts to family dynamics, but must <u>consciously</u> construct her future, as she is left to do at the conclusion.

A comparative examination of Solomon's text will make more apparent that "interrelatedness" I noted earlier. Like *The Killers*, it is a female Oedipus story and like Hamilton's film, it takes a despairing view of the dissolution of the mother/daughter bond. Solomon's film is also transgenerational, only here the daughter takes the initiative to end the family's history of anguish by violently ensuring that "[she] will never have children." The film also acts as a corrective to the conservative resolution of *Sidney's Chair*. Here the accession of the bi-racial son (the dead father) to patriarchal power through identification with the patriarch, is devoid of any value, Oedipus' corresponding rejection of the mother here represented by an act of brutal betrayal. Patriarchal privilege, however, proves an unbearable burden for its latest convert, resulting in compensatory familial abuse.

Countering the generational despair is a "relationship" that highlights the transformative potential of the female-to-female bond. Here, a wife's (the heroine's mother) increasing sympathy for her white mother-in-law, who (betrayed by the son and discarded by the patriarch) dies alone in England, corresponds to her growing disaffection with her oppressive husband. Here, identification transcends both race and time and is profoundly feminist. Solomon's expressive employment of narrative and stylistic devices, particularly her use of flashback, is also notable. The comparative sophistication of her work suggests the possibilities available to practitioners of a form with which she explicitly identifies: guerilla filmmaking.

AND THE CDISIS OF SOCIALISM

AND THE CRISIS OF SOCIALISM: "Possible Endings"

"Within the Revolution. everything, against it, nothing." Fidel Castro, "Words to the Intellectuals", 1961



The Cuban films premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival illustrated the cinematic qualities which have marked the long reputation of that national cinema as perhaps the most aesthetically and politically celebrated of the so-called third world. The feature-length *Guantanamera* by great director Tomas Gutiérrez Alea, co-directed with Juan Carlos Tabío, and two short dramas, *Madagascar* by Fernando Pérez and *Love Me and You Will See...* by Daniel Díaz Torres all display lush cinematography, flamboyant performances, innovative story-telling and complex relation to artistic traditions of both popular genres and modernist avant-gardes.

Each as well gives the spectator fascinating, troubling and intricate perspective on the contemporary state of Cuban society and its revolution. In current right-wing orthodoxy, that picture should only be read as part of the obituary for socialism midst the global triumph of capitalism; Cuba is simply the next domino waiting to fall in the restorations of capitalism after the collapse of Communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Cuba, however, persists, frustrating that revanchist determinism, and the films show us relationships between culture and political economy, individual and social context and bureaucracy and democracy that are more complex and aesthetic, less reductive and hopeless. In the unequal, violent and divided world belied by the Newspeak of globalization, interpretation and response across borders, from first to third world, needs caution and respect. These are films not documents, but still, as the filmmakers of revolutionary Cuba have always insisted, related to specific institutions, and the historical process of the revolution itself.

This point is particularly trenchant within the institution of international film festivals which increasingly organise globalized film distribution and promotion, facilitate co-productions and investment flows, determine winners and losers in commerce and art. Obviously, these Cuban filmmakers need to function institutionally here in this rigged marketplace: Guantanamera is an international co-production and the two shorts appeared sub-titled courtesy of an American (!) philanthropic foundation. Just as obviously, that institution attempts an homogenous interpretation of "products from the hinterland" - the exotic commodification of underdevelopment, the expunging of political content, the marketing of acceptably entertaining characteristics of national cultures. The local press offered an obnoxious instance of this policing in a festival review (Isabel Vincent, "A 'new irreverence' sweeps Latin America", Toronto Star, September 13, 1995). Filmmakers from diverse countries are simply lumped together, all begging for co-production funding, all promising slick and stylish entertainment, "universal" themes and a resolute forgetting of past political sins by third world filmmakers. Tabío and his film are thrown into the blender in a marketing variation, as examples of dissidence under Communism, despite his reasonable disclaimer that "a film is not a political discourse." Cuban cinema's record as critical and popular within the revolution is just ignored. Egregiously, a plot summary of Guantanamera indicates the reviewer did not see the film. Cultural globalization or neo-colonialism?

More materially, that globalization - capital's reconquest of lost territories, re- and dis-location of production in all industries, chaotic profiteering in debt and speculation, ruthless enforcement of this restructuring by capital's international cops, the IMF and the World Bank - has precipitated the prolonged crisis in Cuba. Those economic and political difficulties, and the threatened future

of the revolution, provide the crucial institutional and historical context in a broad account of these films. For ICAIC, the famed Cuban film institute, this has meant reducing annual production to one or two features and several documentaries. Feature films now require co-production funds from outside the country. The apprenticeship of new filmmakers that marked ICAIC must now be combined with entrepreneurship, with adverse effects on the aspirations of newer and younger filmmakers. The vanguard role that Cuban cinema played for Latin America and the third world has been curtailed.

Those changes are a microcosm of the contraction of the Cuban economy since the late eighties. For most of the seventies and eighties, Cuba maintained considerable growth and prosperity, consolidating the egalitarian gains in health, education and living standards that led the ex-colonial world. This was in stark contrast to the rest of Latin America's "lost decade" of depression, debt crisis and economic regression. That relative success depended on relations of solidarity with COMECON, the Communist economic bloc especially exports of sugar and imports of oil. But it also depended on increased integration with capitalism through imports of technology from Europe using credits and loans from Western banks. While industrialisation and diversification had been widely debated in the 60s (and often associated with Che Guevara and leftist critics of the Revolution), this cautious approach responded to the continual threat from the United States, the Soviet leadership's conservative pressure and to the "comparative advantage" of continuity with the island's dependence on sugar. Great hopes for new revolutions in Latin America failed, pragmatism seemed to work. However, as commodity prices continued to fall and interest rates on those foreign loans continued to rise, Cuba hit its own debt crisis; this was the cost of classic colonial monoculture and increasing integration into the world capitalist market, as much as indigenous deficiencies in building socialism. The buffer of Communist trade links could not sustain Cuba and the similarly exposed Eastern European nations from the chaotic financial and over-production crisis striking capitalist economies globally, especially in the vulnerable "developing" world. Communism was revealed, despite the military status and international power of the Soviet Union, as fragile and subordinate within a global system that was both triumphant and in a long decline. As Trotsky and others of the Left Opposition to Stalinism, brilliantly analysed in the 30s, bureaucratically deformed socialism would be transitional, unable to catch up in technology and consumption without revolutionary breakthroughs in the advanced capitalist countries. Its bureaucratic layers would splinter, opting for capitalist restoration, even fascism, or genuinely democratic revolution. Trotsky was prescient about the future of "actually existing socialism", just wrong about the timetable and revolutionary possibilities, so far, of bureaucratic collapse.

When the Soviet Union collapsed and reneged on its oil and aid agreements, Cuba went from crisis to disaster. 60% of exports disappeared over night and the tightened American embargo hit imports, particularly medicine. Shortages of all kinds have tormented the Cuban people, with reduced rationing and a decline in the much vaunted improvement in living standards. Following the punitive Russian betrayal and the sabrerattling of Bush, Clinton and Helms, another invasion seemed possible. Castro noted that the immediate importance of the collapse of Communism was the danger of imperial intervention throughout the third world; this has proven true in Africa, Central America, the Gulf war, Yugoslavia...but not so far in Cuba.

While the one-party rule of the Revolution has often been criticised for rigidity, repression and inefficiency, it has also been celebrated, particularly compared to other Communist countries, as developing a greater degree of popular participation and legitimisation, a more humane and spirited ideology and an admirable internationalism, centred on third world solidarity. In the past, Cuba received considerable naive "third worldist" adulation as a symbol of revolutionary hope and the target of relentless imperialist hostility. Now erstwhile supporters may slot the Revolution into the inevitability of collapse or dismiss it for failing to meet purist criteria for socialist change. Unfortunately, most of the Western Left has been indifferent to the catastrophic consequences of capitalist restoration civil wars, dictatorships, authoritarian nationalism and racism, regression for women's rights, collapsed economies and crazed neo-liberal shock therapy, the plunder of the contradictory achievements. But Cuban strategy in this disastrous change in the world balance of power may surprise these expectations.

Since the late eighties, Cuba began a Campaign of Rectification and then the Special Period in a Time of Peace. The first involved concerted attacks on corruption and the performance of middle bureaucrats and featured the moral exhortations and circumscribed popular mobilisation that have been a feature of the Revolution. As shortages and rationing tightened belts, this recalled Guevara's call for moral not material incentives in building socialism in the sixties. (This slogan degenerated into the New Man satirized in Alea's and Tabío's Strawberry and Chocolate) The Special Period has seen economic reforms that recall Gorbachev's perestroika, the market socialism of Hungary and Yugoslavia or the NEP of the Soviet twenties. Increasing enterprise autonomy, including unemployment on a hitherto unknown scale, appearance of small markets in food and crafts, the legalisation of the dollar economy and the "greying" of the black market, dramatic openings to foreign capital in tourism and mining and continued aggressive export strategies. Joint ventures in the production and successful international marketing of Alea's recent films are a small example of this shift. The decline has been halted, food situation improved and some growth renewed. The reforms are consistent with orthodox Communist compromise and integration with "progressive" capital, global and local, over many decades -Socialism in One Country, the Popular Front, Peaceful Co-existence, Detente, China's New Economic Zones. They are also depressingly consistent with the austerity, export dependence, subservience to multi-national capital, increasing class differentiation and weakening of social protections forced on governments, regardless of political stripe, throughout the world over the last decade. Politically, change has been more modest - a new tolerance of religion, multi-candidate, but not multi-party, elections - but Castro argued against Gorbachev that combining the economic reforms of perestroika with the political opening of glasnost would lead to disaster. Obviously, Fidel was right! This is a strategy of survival not revolution; as Castro told the New York Times, "I am not a great fan of capitalism, but I am a realist."

These changes and the prolonged crisis provide terrain, detail and depth to each of these films but not their themes in any didactic sense. These involve individual responses and dilemmas at their most personal and emotional but obviously in this historic context. Crisis figures in each film to generate opportunity or the prospect of turning point, not as disaster or collapse.

In Guantanamera, a road movie that combines farce, satire and romance with a sharp critique of

bureaucracy, everyday life is textured by the difficulties of the crisis and how people respond and cope. The undertaker Adolfo, a pompous and opportunistic bureaucrat, concocts an elaborate scheme for saving scarce gas by sharing transportation of bodies with other undertakers across the island; the satire on bureaucratic wackiness recalls Alea's classic Death of a Bureaucrat (1966). He hopes a successful initiative will get him promoted out of provincial Guantanamo. When his wife's visiting aunt dies suddenly, in the arms of a long lost love, we feel the sadness of unrequited dreams and passions, but Adolfo sees a chance to test his plan in action. The body, Adolfo, Georgina, his wife and Candido, the old lover, begin an hilarious cross-island journey filled with coincidences and mishaps, with rekindled passion and misplaced bodies, breakdowns and fistfights. A sardonic variation of the famous song that gives the film its title accompanies this cortege. For Georgina, the trip becomes revelatory when they repeatedly run into her former student, Mariano, now a truck driver, and gradually she must admit to her attraction to him and to her dissatisfaction with an obnoxious and dictatorial husband. Love triumphs, several bodies are buried and the bureaucrat is toppled, literally and metaphorically, in an intricate and layered resolution.

Centrally, the film concludes with the happy coming together of Georgina and Mariano and the couple's transformation is inflected with the density of political and social relations. Georgina has withdrawn from her life - she seems not to notice the failings of her charmless spouse, she has simply abandoned her career as economics professor, hounded out by dogmatic "Marxist-Leninists". The romance marks her re-entry to social life: she will return to work and confront her political silencing. Mariano must undergo a complementary transformation. He is an engineer who can make his living as a truck driver and shady operator in the black market. His appealing character is part of that naturalisation of petty trade noted above, but his transformation centers on gender relations. He has become an infamous "womaniser", with a girlfriend at every truck stop, but feels he must become responsible and stable to really be happy; Georgina reforms his machismo. (Alea more sharply took apart masculine behaviour in Up to a Point, 1984) The successful romance is not just the consummation of desires and generic expectations, but a social revitalisation for each protagonist, a



Guantanamera



turn from, respectively, passivity and irresponsibility. Not only is individual change romanticised, it responds to the necessity of social changes, loosely defined in this historic context.

At the same time, each must totally reject Georgina's husband. It s not just that he lacks the romance she desires but that the film's journey, his inane bureaucratic plan, reveals his authoritarian stupidity, his anachronistic sexism towards her, his obsession with his own position and advance. Even his parenting is condemned as politically repressive: their daughter fled to Miami when he forbade her discussing Gorbachev and perestroika! As his wife begins to reconstruct herself, he becomes increasingly obsessed with fantasies of memorialising his "achievements"; fittingly the film concludes with the apparently fatal failure of his statuesque ambitions. Happiness requires the rejection of his dogmatism and egotism, so the romance is both socially and politically suffused with openness and tolerance. Of course, this is entertainment not a progammatic statement. This sunny glasnost, this democratic love, may not be adequate to the depth of the actual crisis but the social, political, even symbolic, typage intensifies the stakes of the characters' fates, repositioning them, and the audiences' amusement, "within the Revolution."

Much of the film's humour is based on a sharp portrayal of the economic difficulties of contemporary Cuba. The American dollar is everywhere, practically everyone seems to have a black market deal to make or something to sell, in contrast to shortages at official stores and truck stops. This is played comically and

optimistically as small triumphs of ingenuity and spirit against adversity. Petty trade is not represented as nascent capitalism, or even particularly avaricious, but as vitality or just plain coping with the difficult everyday of the Special Period. Cuban films have long been interested in the rehabilitation of outsiders and the underclass into the mainstream, for example in Sara Gomez' One Way or Another (1974) Here, marginals are tolerated not reformed, in a comic naturalisation of the opening to small enterprise. On one hand, it is a variation of the spirit of tolerance with which Strawberry and Chocolate, much more didactically, defended the inclusion of gays in the Revolution. On the other hand, implicitly, average Cubans have all become marginal as the mainstream, specifically the state, fails to perform in the way that it had. Everyday strategies seem reasonable, even lively, compared to the foolish ignorance Adolfo typifies; he is laughably unaware of the real workings of life around him. In comparison, in Cyclo, a stunning film from Vietnam, the black market and newly legalised capitalism are a nightmare of gangsters, drugs and prostitution, with grotesque dichotomies of opulence and squalor. Similarly, recent Russian and East European films use conventions of realism and melodrama to show the misery and despair that has followed Communism's collapse. For Alea the generic choice of comedy allows a more optimistic take within the current reformist strategy.

In the same vein, the film makes no visual or thematic reference to other facets of the Special Period: for example, the powerful presence of multinational corporations, the proliferation of prostitution connected to tourism, class and status differentiation. Again, these occlusions are tactically within the film's generic limitations as well as its thematic optimism. Only Adolfo's possessiveness about his wife, his scheme, his managerial prestige are represented as anything like class ambitions: others are just making do. His behaviour rubs against the casual egalitarianism of all the Cubans he meets. Given the transmutation of bureaucrats into capitalists in the former Communist countries, this may be a subtle class warning.

More obviously, the portrayal of Adolfo is consistent with the critique of authoritarian and inefficient bureaucrats, naturalising the entrepreneurial initiative of managers while mocking this instance. As we careen across Cuba, Adolfo's buffoonery plays against the comparatively normal functioning of other managers and the efficient energy of numerous micro-entrepreneurs of the black market. Adolfo wants to make himself emblematic of the social order but the film remains ambiguous about whether he is a representative or aberrant product of the system, or both. It is silent on institutional mediations; this bureaucrat is an idiot, but bureaucracy as systematic problem may be recuperable by his exclusion and Cuba's historic difficulties are answered by endearing individual transformations. Openness, love, change - these are the democratic corrective to bureaucracy, perhaps to economic crisis as well.

Two characters also come together and set off to change their lives at the conclusion of Madagascar, but the future is definitely not clear, or optimistic. This is a story of generational conflict where Cuba's crisis is understood as essentially spiritual. Laurita wants most of all to be completely different from her mother, Laura, another dissatisfied college professor. Laurita's search for new values takes her through a succession of fads and religions, from Santería to reggae to Western consumerism, but centres on a fantasy obsession with Madagascar. She chants the island's name as if she can be transported magically there. The allure of Madagascar is never specified, but her strange fixation is more than personal. In a stunning pan, we see the roofs of Havana dotted with chanters, as if a cult of exotic escape had suddenly spread.

Laura's malaise at first seems more mundane and middle-aged: two divorces and the oppressive mediocrity of a boring job. She responds by moving the family constantly from apartment to apartment. Escape is not the answer: a former student who emigrates to Paris is derided as stupid and materialistic. She tries to respond to Laurita's adolescent angst in conventional motherly ways but surprises us by finally joining her daughter's quest. They set off together, unnervingly confident, for Madagascar.

The eerie ending recasts a story of growing pains as surreal parable, though its message is unclear, unstat-



ed. The foundation of the tale is the way the country's impasse is felt in people's hearts, the apparent failure of the campaigns of moral exhortation, the observable faltering of the Revolution's values among the young. Material difficulty is little registered in this film; perhaps suggested in the strange images of feasts of cabbages, glowing green, which punctuate the film. But the fantasy resonates with the difficulties and accomplishments of the Revolution. Perhaps it reflects the cult of escape which did seize thousands of Cubans in 1994, sending "rafters" on their way to the promises and cruelties of Miami capitalism. Perhaps, it conjures a flight to a magical isle, but if we ever arrived we would confront an even worse legacy of colonial oppression. Maybe Laura and Laurita would be flying over an Africa that thousands of other Cubans had flown to, as doctors and technicians and soldiers, where Che fought in the Congo, where Cubans defeated the South African army All this is unspoken, but if the film ends with a propulsion that is strange and dark, delusional and optimistic, all at once, it is because the characters are confronting their historic moment in their imaginations, where resolutions are always most certain and unbelievable.

From the foreboding of parable to the delight of fable, Love Me and You Will See... has an ending which is definitely happy and optimistic (depending on which ending you prefer). It concerns a trio of old criminals, defiantly non-rehabilitatable, more congenial marginals. Their leader, Juvenito, remains fixated on the night of the Revolution's victory, 35 years ago. Not for politics, though. Revolutionary celebrations interrupted a big bank job and the gang was caught, but it is the image of a beautiful woman on that night that obsesses him still. When he thinks he sees her again, his quest begins with all the contrivances of farce, lost bundles of cash, mistaken identities and a fortune-teller who might help him. She gives her clients romance novels with the last pages torn out and tells them the "possible endings" must be supplied by them. Juvenito, and the film, try several endings before he arrives, unexpectedly, at happiness with the fortune-teller, not the unattainable object of his long obsession. The Revolution literally frames this story, at a skewed angle, but, with help from the fortune-teller and the audience's enjoyment of the right resolution, Juvenito chooses his own tale to live and his own misery or delight, learns that the past does not freeze the present and the future must be chosen. Once more, individual imagination and desire within historical context. The play with narrative is again lightly suggestive of surrealism, but popularised, and engaged with its audience, in ways historic surrealism did not often achieve.

Alea and other Cuban filmmakers have been criti-

cised by Western critics for moving away from the complex narrative innovations and formal reflexivity of the 60s and 70s, exemplified by the continuing reverence for Alea's great Memories of Underdevelopment (1968). This seems short-sighted. The historic conjunctures when formalist and socialist radicalism have closely entwined (the 1920s, the 1960s) have been few and produced by many particular circumstances. But Cuban filmmakers and intellectuals have been successfully emphasising popular genres and storytelling, in straightened conditions, with an analysis of the difficulty and importance of making entertainment. These three films illustrate an intelligent sense of the workings and pleasures of genre and a range of narrative structures and traditions. More broadly, they remain with the tradition of Third Cinema the Cubans have done so much to develop because their characters' stories are still about resistance and socialism. This isn't didactic or mobilising or over-arching explanation or comforting, but, in the details of the crisis, the resonance of the Revolution, the vitality of a national culture, the looming shadow of imperialism.

These films won't tell us the future for Cuban socialism. E.P. Thompson famously corrected Raymond Williams; culture needs to be understood as more than "a whole way of life," but as a whole way of struggle. In these films, we see and enjoy something of the way Cuban culture is struggling. Perhaps the optimism - qualified, possible - of these stories is the riposte to the hopeless determinism of those impossibly grand narratives of The End of History and the Death of Socialism. These Cubans are making and telling their stories, their history, just "not in circumstances of their own choosing."

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BY LAURA U. MARKS

ike Hoolboom's feature-length film *House of Pain* (1995) is a suite of stories that turn around abuse, scatology, and bizarre manipulations of bodies. In "Precious", Kika Thorne plays a woman who fucks the earth in a cemetery, finds a magical eye, and bathes her face with urine. In "Scum", a married couple played by Charles Costello and Janieta Eyre use their own shit to play out a dynamic of alienation and self-loathing. In "Kisses", Paul Couillard and Ed Johnson enact a game of sexual torture and revenge, ending in a frolic at a playground. And in "Shiteater", Andrew Wilson transforms himself into a magical being who, along with other morning rituals, generates a vast amount of (fake) shit and stuffs it into his mouth. Audience members at the premiere screening of *House of Pain* demanded why Hoolboom had made such a shocking, ugly movie. But they also acknowledged its beauty, at least at the level of the film's richly textured, black-and-white surface.

What does it mean that a film that depicts appalling scenes of torture, shit-smearing, and the abuse of objects is beautiful? I don't think the shock value of *House of Pain* is a question of épater le bourgeois, even if such a thing were possible nowadays. For one thing, there is a simplicity to the way the film presents its scatological scenes. This was not the deadpan, can-you-take-this shock value of rather adolescent films like Gregg Araki's *The Doom Generation* (1995), Todd Verow's *Frisk* (1995), Bruce La Bruce's *Super 8 1/2* (1994) (which succeeds for other reasons) or Rico Martinez's *Glamazon* (1993). In *House of Pain* the simplicity seems more like innocence, the way a child does things before knowing they are supposed to be right or wrong.

The four stories are organized symmetrically. In the two middle films, couples find some sort of catharsis only after wallowing in abjection so extreme that they would have to dissolve as separate individuals. The framing films have an air of redemption and peace, and both end with the figure walking on the beach or into the water.

Also, both characters in the outer films use strapon dildos-stunningly large, smooth, elegant abstractions; in the inner films, fucking is done with real penises that bear no comparison. This seems to be a comment on the insufficiency of representations of masculine sexuality, if not the worlds-apart difference between penis and phallus. Kika Thorne's "angel" fucks with her strap-on and comes, even generates (she fucks the ground, then finds a magical eye in the hole she has made), with a sex that seems comfortably borrowed, seems to fit her well in House of Pain's alternative universe of sexual endowment. The character Andrew Wilson plays transcends his sex, or rather transcends despite his sex: he erupts in other ways, defecating profusely and, with subtle eroticism, breaking a raw egg in his mouth, but like the woman of "Precious", he comes only through a dildo.

By contrast, biological male sexuality is punished in *House of Pain*. In "Scum", each member of the estranged couple finds an alternative erotic object. For the woman it's a bicycle, which she caresses and makes love with, in a tender, visually lyrical scene where the shapes of the bicycle echo the lines of the woman's moving body. For the man the erotic object is a cauliflower. It is extremely painful to watch him cut a hole in the cauliflower, widen it only a bit with his finger, and painfully fuck its hard interior with his real penis. (The subsequent shot will make me skip those dip-filled vegetables at parties from now on.) And in "Kisses", the engagements between the two men are more like rape or torture. The man played by Couillard undergoes horrible torments, beginning

when the camera discovers him sobbing on a seemingly endless pile of concrete rubble, then finding worms and greedily eating them, and continuing to the scenes where the other man tortures him.

Couillard co-wrote this scene with Hoolboom. Not only is Hoolboom willing to devise scenes where male characters can be humiliated (which easily extend to the director himself) but so is Couillard, who plays the most put-upon figure in the film. Perhaps it is at the level of writing that the consensus takes place, the agreement to accept pain and humiliation. It doesn't happen in the film itself: the woman in "Scum" violates the man while he is sleeping; the second man in "Kisses" fucks the first man when he finds him lying unconscious by the train tracks. These are not depictions of consensual S/M bedroom behavior; this is not a movie about S/M. The characters break the rules; they represent something out of control.

Certainly House of Pain is organized around sexual subjection, domination, and transgression. But these seem to be means of expression for something else. The characters sleepwalk through scenes, as though they have achieved some state of grace -Hoolboom does call them "Angels" in the credits. There's an experimental, neutral quality to the scene, for example, where the woman of "Precious" urinates in a pail (and a sculptural fascination with the way the urine sprays from her shaved genitals), or the scene in "Scum" in which the "husband" smears excrement on his chest. I have to say that this aestheticizing attitude on my part might be a strategy to deal with extreme images. But Hoolboom's own approach stresses that these images are not there just for their narrative value. House of Pain is an expressionist film, pushing explicit and violent sexual imagery to a certain limit the same way an abstract painter breaks the codes of painting. Hoolboom shot and edited most of the film in a way that works against the eroticism of the sexual scenes, fragmenting and abstracting them. But this style brings another sort of eroticism into the image. There's a scene in "Kisses" where the "victim" turns on his aggressor, binds him with wire, and shaves his head: it's shot in a very dark room, and their struggling figures glow and reflect in the darkness. In "Scum" there's a beautiful shot where the "wife" is bathing, and the harsh contrast and high exposure almost solarize the elegant line of her body and her lovely face.

The four stories are too specific to be read as allegories. The scene in "Scum" does not seem to be an iconic shit-smearing scene, if you can imagine such a thing. The pieces of shit are small and fibrous; when he rubs it on his chest it catches in the hairs. There is too much detail for the scene to remain in

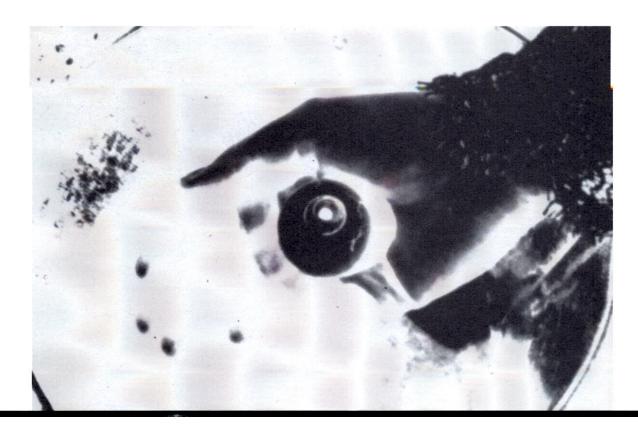
the mind as an icon of transgression. Detail complicates an image, polluting it with other ideas, suggesting that to put a simple reading on these scenes would be missing the point. In "Kisses", the two men kiss, suck, and drink each other through a curtain with a slit in it. The curtain is zebra-patterned. This groovy visual distraction makes me start thinking about why the wall might be zebra, instead of reflecting on the erotics of domination or whatever.

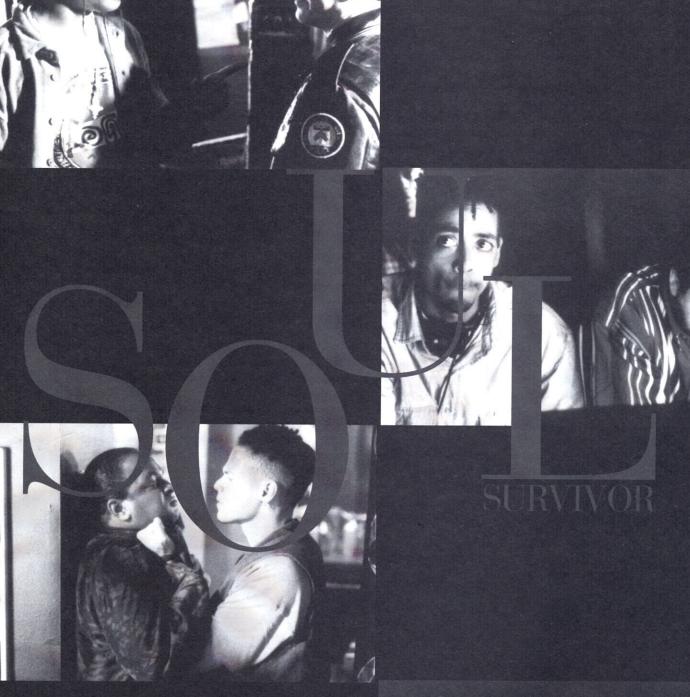
Earl Peach's sound track also forecloses on any sort of iconic quality for the film. In "Scum" and "Kisses" the music draws a lot of attention to itself, changing dramatically with each short scene. The music seems to be most successful in "Shiteater", where instead of changing every minute it maintains a growling, eerily modulated chord throughout. Like the music, the exaggerated sound effects—the juicy noises of fucking, the sloppy sounds of shit, the irritating sound of a zipper being pulled up—perversely underscore the fact that this is a film, an experimental film. Or, again, maybe it's me who disengages from the film at these points. In my notes taken in the dark screening room, the expert detached criticism gives way to "ICK!!!" in more than one place. An image that is just bearable to watch becomes unbearable for me when sound is added.

In its search for an intimacy that breaches the body's boundaries, it's interesting to compare *House of Pain* to *Frisk*, which was also at the Toronto festival. Like Dennis Cooper's novel on which it is based, *Frisk* takes the rather densely literal approach that the best way to "get inside" another person is to cut them open. It's like a bad joke on the idea of visceral knowledge. *House of Pain* seems to be more

about finding a state of grace within, or despite, one's own body, a state that can only be achieved by taking bodies to extremes. The film touches on a deeply sad, inexpressible longing. How can we live inside these bodies? Can our bodies express truth or love? The ordeals the "angels" endure test the limits of self-coherence and the possibility of survival, with love or self-love intact. When at the end of "Precious" the woman walks into the light on the beach there is a great sense of release, of having purged some demon. I think this feeling of overwhelming longing is the quality that attracts viewers even when we cannot bear the scenes depicted.

Ultimately, House of Pain uses the material of film itself to express what it means to get inside another body. The high-contrast film turns everything depicted into an enormous landscape: the elaborate fabrics and laces the woman wears in Precious, for example, become a world of texture that blends with the woman's own skin and the grass and sand behind her to make an entire consistent skin on the surface of the image. Frequent close-ups and shots in enclosed places also pull the viewer into a place where she cannot distinguish near and far. Hoolboom's camera (and film stock) have an obsessive desire to bring what is far near, so that the image itself becomes like skin opening onto skin. It is not a voyeuristic kind of looking at least, the explicit stuff is shot in a way that seems just as interested in shadows and forms as in the actual shit, cocks etc.—not a desire to subject things to vision, but to dissolve vision in the things erupting before it. House of Pain creates an intimacy that is less like getting inside a body than like turning the film itself into a quivering skin.







CELEBRATION: SOUL SURVIVOR AND THE DISCOURSE OF HERITAGE

by **Rinaldo Walcott**

So that my own aesthetic formulation for ourselves begins with rhythm: survival rhythm, emancipation rhythm, transfiguration rhythm; and how the one, the ego, comes to this, comes out of this, relates to this and us and others.

Edward Kamau Brathwaite, 1975.

The complex realities of black community in Canada have not yet been mapped critically in our feature films. Selina Williams' 1994 short, *Saar*, for example, merely hints at this complexity by gathering a diasporic black women's community. My desire for complexity returns me to the Dream Warriors' musical announcement of a "voyage through the multiverse". For me, the lyrics of the Dream Warriors signal the multiple positionalities of black diasporic peoples. I think that the symbolic moment of a multiverse is particularly significant not only for black Canadian music, but also for the development of black Canadian cinema.

Such a proclamation calls for a contextualization of who the black Canadian might be. How do we understand who the black Canadian is? What is black Canadian community(ies) and what constitutes black Canadian expressive cultures? Addressing these questions would go a long way in helping us to make sense of what would be required of a cinema that speaks the past, present and future of black Canadian identities.

If definitions of black Canadian are centred around political practices/act(ion)s that signal a transgression of instituted forms and practices of domination, then black Canadian might be anyone who resists in concerted ways, with a vision of emancipation, all forms of domination. Black Canadian is a counter narrative or utterance that calls into question the very conditions of nation-bound identity, at the same time that national discourses attempt to render blackness outside the nation. My articulation of black Canadian will undoubtedly leave some feeling that the borders are open for all to come aboard. In many ways they are. I attempt here to articulate a space that acknowledges transgressing the "usual and assumed" as an important practice of the political. Thus, my questions do not intend to stifle creative and imaginative works of art, nor to detract from their

achievement. Stephen Williams' *Soul Survivor* (and its reception) offers a rich site to explore these questions.

I theorize black Canadian as wholly outside the biological and the national. Black Canadian is for me syncretic, always in revision and in a process of becoming. It is constituted from multiple histories of uprootedness, migration, exchanges and political acts of defiance and self (re)definition. I use the "archaic" and "ancient" term black as a way of framing the political discourse that I construct here. I attempt to formulate an understanding of political acts that go beyond linear, narrow and rigid narratives of identity that are organised around origin as founded in Africa and thus constitute the cultural identity of black skinned peoples. Such positions still carry great sway in our discussions today, but as Stuart Hall (1992) states: "Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made within the discourse of history and culture" (p. 224). The discourse of blackness allows for understanding identity as practices of identification used to revise and creolize who we are.

Williams' use of reggae could be seen as a signal of black diasporic cultural identities if music was being used as a site for diasporic identification. A D.J. opens the film announcing the next tune/song to be played. This cinematic riff on music recalls Paul Gilroy's (1993) injunction that music characterizes almost everything cultural about black life. By placing music as immediately central, Williams immediately opens spaces for specific identities and multiple identifications. The fact that a "rooted" identity quickly becomes Soul Survivor's modus operandi signals but one of its many weaknesses.

The Politics of Naming

Two black men, (Stephen Williams and Clement Virgo) produce Canada's first black feature films, and the discourse of black Canada as identity marker disappears from discussion of the films. And more importantly, their potential for mapping the complex processes of blackness is totally elided. In the "Festival" issue of Take One, to cite but one example of popular journalism, both Soul Survivor and Rude are marked simultaneously as "Jamaican-Canadian" films. 1 Such naming is more than curious. What does this return to ethnic particularity suggest about blackness and its chain of meanings in Canada? What are we to understand by the term black Canadian and for whom is it reserved? As is often the case with films that seek to explore the politics of identity, Soul Survivor finds itself being more concerned with root and origin, rather than with "seeing identity as a process of movement and meditation that is more appropriately approached via the homonym routes" (Gilroy, 1993, p. 19). The assertion by film journalists that we now have a "Jamaican-Canadian" filmic identity, as opposed to

black Canadian, renders invisible the complex processes of how various moments and forms of blackness become and are becoming in Canada.

Such interpretations and naming of these films as "Jamaican-Canadian" draw on continued multicultural narratives of *heritage* which are concerned with origin and tend to occlude the complex creolized multicultural constitution of black Canadians. A Canadian multicultural desire for simplicity and knowability is revealed in the journalist's naming. Such designations suggest that Canadian black identities must be rooted elsewhere and that elsewhere is always outside Canada; this allows the making of black subjects as knowable objects through a simple story of origins.

The naming spells much more, for the said naming triggers a chain of meanings that are associated with assumed actions and specific identities in Canada. It is the desire to pin down identity as knowable and therefore explainable that renders the naming "Jamaican-Canadian" meaningful and common sensical to critics. In recent interviews with both Williams and Virgo biography takes center stage. Such points of reference point to how film critics and others can use these films to pathologise immigrant Jamaicans, to thus render them knowable and explainable to a "mainstream" audience as the Canadian exotic, victim, "underclass" thing. I would contend that the films' lend themselves to such readings.

Mapping the Identity of a Soul Survivor

Jerry Gafio Watts (1994) writes of the "victim status syndrome" which he states can be "a useful mechanism for inducing white guilt" (p. 19). In my view, victim status syndrome dominates the narratives of "hood" films. In the "hood" films characterized by New Jack City, Juice, Straight Out of Brooklyn, Boyz 'N' the Hood, Menace to Society and so on, renderings of blackness as victim-ridden, criminalized and masculinized represent the totality of blackness to both white and black middle classes. The filmmakers construct black patriarchal "heroic transcendence" 2 as the site or avenue to emancipation and/or survival for black people. That is, narratives suggest men are responsible for black community. These black narratives suggest that black women, gays, lesbians and anyone who does not toe the line of narrowly defined blackness are rendered unimportant. Counter to such circumscribed narratives, a "real" black Canadian "soul survivor" might be one who revises and creolizes identity for continued survival as an act to self-emancipation.

Soul Survivor does not engage the diasporic connectedness and rhizomatic character of blackness in the Canadian context (there are a few hints, an African immigrant family is one of the indebted families); instead it insists on an immigrant "underclass" represen-



tation which clouds Canadian complexities of blackness. The underclass representation points to the film's limited expressions of Canadian blackness. This representation fits into a transglobal fixity which denotes blackness as a sign of victim of white racism, struggling to be free in the centre of a white hell. While such renditions of blackness might signal "truth" for some, in the realm of cinematic representation such renditions fit neatly into recent and current "hood" films that render blackness in a one- dimensional relation, participating in what C.L.R. James (1993) refers to as "the struggle for happiness".

The struggle for happiness in these "hood" films depicts blackness in relation to a dominating and controlling whiteness. Though these films carry a strong sense of black aesthetic and aural practices that massage the senses, these films do not construct black selves in the ways that jazz, blues, reggae and calypso have historically done. That is, despite overtures that suggests self definition, these films do not render complex discussions of black life.

Here I differ with Toronto film critics and/or promoters who have read *Soul Survivor* (as well as *Rude*) as significantly different from African American "hood" films. *Soul Survivor* offers a Canadian realist version of the currently commodified transglobal renderings of

blackness as violent, criminal and "underclass". While it is always possible to read these works as demonstrating the processes of racism in North American urban centres, and I believe that such readings are a crucial element of both their intent and narratives, nonetheless they posit an economy of race that does not challenge current dominant symbolic orders of what sells as blackness cinematically.

Soul Survivor's Plot

In Williams' Soul Survivor the main character Tyrone (Peter Williams) is tormented by his "struggle for happiness". Tyrone's struggle for happiness resides in the desire to own and operate a small restaurant that plays the latest reggae tunes. Williams continually links music to his cinematic narrative of identity and displacement. Racism is the major obstacle to Tyrone achieving his desires. It seems that the only possible way out is to become employed for Winston (George Marks). Winston runs a menacing semi-legal business, but more importantly, he represents the patriarchal

¹ See Marc Glassman (1995) and Angela Baldassarre (1995) both in *Take One*.

² See Watts (1994), p.22.

black father figure in the film. Looking up to Winston raises important ethical issues for Tyrone, since Winston represents what he would like to be (wealthy) but Winston also represents what Tyrone would not want to be (criminal). Tyrone is caught at a dangerous crossroad. One foot rests in the darker avenue of the criminal underworld, through his relationship with Winston and Busho (Clark Johnson), and his other foot lies in the torturous avenue of Canadian racism which forces him into the situation with Winston in the first instance. Tyrone is a victim who we must pity and identify with as a casuality of racism.

Tyrone becomes the collector for Winston, eventually exceeding at the job. A generous reading of the film might see Tyrone as representing the African god *Esu*³ with one foot in this world and one foot in the world of the gods. His miraculous escape from the white racist tenants whose last money he took for Winston, is but one illustration. The constant shots of the African mask around his neck further invokes the divine qualities that Tyrone possesses. He is a walking, talking incarnation of DuBoisian doubleness. It is the limitations of that doubleness, however, that I question.

A black Canadian process of identification should, rather, centre black people in a space where struggle and resistance is highlighted. More importantly, the shaping and (re)shaping of identity in Canada should be demonstrated through black political action. The designation black Canadian suggests the rhythms of black migration, and disrupts the ethnic absolutist claim to blackness as sign of oppression: it recasts blackness as performative.

One of the important roles for Tyrone is to protect and shadow his cousin and friend Rueben (David Smith), yet another example of his divine qualities. Rueben is portrayed as an "irresponsible" Rastafarian musician who owes Winston five thousand dollars and is reckless regarding repayment. Rueben often acts from impulse not from reason and is continually referred to as childish, crazy or mad. Only the impotent Papa (Ardon Bess) thinks that he is smart. Rueben eventually organizes a strike which is meant to bring "Babylon Vampire" down -- Winston. The strike leads to Reuben's murder and Tyrone's only lapse of impotency.

Beyond the Soft Dick Syndrome

It is my contention that "hood" films are premised on the idea that representations of blackness make sense in an economy of "underclass", black (immigrant) male impotency. Consequently, it is the regaining of black male potency that "hood" films explore and seek to (re)place as the fundamental survival of the self and black communities. The black man as impotent is best represented by Papa. In almost every shot except one, Papa is prone and depending on Grandma

(Leonie Frobes) for assistance of some kind. Papa is rendered impotent by the racism of Canadian labour practices. After having worked long hours at "shit jobs" he is of no use to himself and his family, for as Winston says "a man has to look after his family". In fact Grandma now has the upper hand on this once strong man; he is reduced to "lovingly" paying her for his rum and matches to light his cigarettes.

Tyrone must define himself against this impotent father figure who was once a trade unionist, a socialist in Jamaica and "defender of the small man." Winston who claims that "money is everything," is thus the more appropriate father-figure who Tyrone emulates and takes advice from. Winston as father-figure epitomizes bourgeois Canada. Winston warns that "You're nothing without money, you're not inside you're outside". Herein lies the struggle for happiness.

While Williams' narrative partially represents a liberating project for blackness, it renders black women mute. Black women represent the lack against which black men must continually regain their potency in the midst of racism and exclusion from capitalist patriarchy. In particular Tyrone's relationship with Annie (Judith Scott) suggests black women's disenfranchisement from liberating narratives of blackness. The film hints that Tyrone's past relationship with Annie went sour after he abused her. In one important scene following police brutality, Annie asserts herself as Rueben's case-worker and Tyrone says to her "you been away too long, forgot what it like". Tyrone does this in the midst of the two most debilitating threats to his manhood — the police and dominating, educated black women with jobs, like Annie. She is implicitly accused of forgetting family connections (and indeed in the film she has none) when Tyrone asserts that he has to look after Rueben. The re-occurring contemporary (urban) tale of black women's desertion of black men is sorely evident here. Soul Survivor offers little of Annie's background, how she became a case-worker, with her trappings of middle-class success, but the film indicates that she might be "a ball-breaker" when she says to Tyrone "you think you fly". Here, like elsewhere, black women contribute to the emasculating apparatus of black men. Annie, however, does come around.

After The Seduction of Some Black Aesthetic Practices

What makes many of these "hood" films appear to be "authentic" representations of blackness is the way in which black cultural practices are crafted into them, facilitating moments for identification. From confrontations with police, to black hair-styles, to proverbs, hood films are populated with numerous elements of black everyday living. *Soul Survivor* makes use of language, vibrant colours, the playing of dominoes,

styles of dress, and posture and jewellery to etch a black aesthetic into the film. The hangout of Winston called *The Black Star Line* references Marcus Garvey and invokes numerous issues too voluminous to discuss here. But one question: are they hanging out in a sinking black ship? These aesthetic practices in the film are not used to signal a diasporic connectedness, but rather they become a part of the continuing catalogue of rootedness that makes this film fit easily with the confining discourse of heritage and origin.

One of the challenging aesthetic features of *Soul Survivor* is how intricate music is to the narrative. Rastas and music, in particular reggae, are indelibly linked. Not merely because Rueben is a musician, but through the ways music functions as voice-over, bringing rhythm and the theme of survival to the film. The rhythm, however, is not an emancipatory rhythm or a transfiguration rhythm as Brathwaite would explain it. In contrast, Reuben's death announces what happens to one's culture in "a land of strangers" as Papa says. Tropes of immigrant culture dying and withering away amidst victimization are standard and easy narratives to tap in to. To re-enact change, rather than simply utilizing the dynamism of black cultural aesthetics, is much more difficult and challenging to accomplish.

Soul Survivor ends with Annie coming to Tyrone's side to sit with him on a stoop to watch the sunset. Grandma continues to play the lottery despite Reuben's death and Papa remains impotent and prone in bed. A haunting and loud rendition of Bob Marley's "Redemption Song" plays on the soundtrack. Annie's subjugation to Tyrone's desire is clear, as is Tyrone's need to assert and fashion a manhood that looks after his family. For the first time Tyrone is not standing above every one, but significantly too, his manhood is affirmed when Annie comes down to his level. As a victim of racism and "brothers jacking other brothers", Tyrone's only response in this film is to survive. Marley's "Redemption Song" becomes a wail for the continued impotence and death of the black man. "How long shall they kill our prophets while we stand aside and look" makes history and identity an issue of life and death.

Sylvia Wynter (1992) argues for new ways of thinking through the politics and practice of aesthetics in literary and film criticism. She states: "The proposal here is that these processes of positive/negative marking which enact/inscribe the code of "life" and "death" are always initiated by the *narratives of origin* from which all such codes and, therefore, their "paradigms of value and authority" are brought to "birth" (p. 251, emphasis in the original). Marley's "Redemption Song" works to make the narrative of black/immigrant victimization complete. In a similar fashion, film critics can assert the film as Jamaican-Canadian because the "paradigms of value and authority" which give "birth" to narratives of

immigrants and blacks as victims fits within a paradigmatic transglobal frame for reading blackness. The invocation of Marley, Rastas, Black Star Line, etc. do not reference the diasporic sharing that these symbols mean, they instead are markers for origin, and roots that eventually wither and die in a "stranger land".⁴

The appellation Black Canadian would complicate the neat packaging of blackness that film critics need because in this instance diasporic dialogue, exchange, connectedness and syncretism are all subsumed in the film's limited narrative. If such "movement" was more readily apparent, perhaps the critics would be required to respond beyond the simple linear structures which locate rooted aesthetic practices as signposts for identity.

The pedagogy of *Soul Survivor* leaves us with a problematic narrative that suggests all that black men desire is to look after their families. Tyrone's opening voice-over assertion that "In this life it's not about collecting other peoples debts it's about paying for your own" similarly sets the film's narrow agenda. Reuben dies because he could not make his payments: Tyrone survives as the embodiment of the "heroic transcendent" black man who suffers and survives "against all odds".

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³ See Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1988). The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism.

⁴ See M. Nourbese Philip (1992). Frontiers: Essays and Writings on Racism and Culture. See in that collection the "Introduction" and "The "Multicultural" Whitewash: Racism in the Ontario Art Funding System".

Crack Visions, Ritual Power and Hybrid Culture in



John L'Ecuyer's Curtis's Charm

by **David McIntosh**

live on a typical downtown Toronto crack corner in a typical working poor neighbourhood marked by chronic poverty and homelessness. The four crack-friendly corners of the intersection of two major thoroughfares are occupied by a 24-hour convenience store, a dimly-lit park, a bus shelter with pay phones and a dingy greasy spoon. Spreading out from the intersection in all directions is a grim array of neglected private and public housing stock interspersed with an occasional underfunded and ineffectual social service agency. This area formerly constituted the fringe of the gay ghetto, but in less than two years it has been transformed into a tensely contested no-man's-land. The corrosive dynamics of crack have seeped into every aspect of daily life, occupying more and more physical and psychic space; violence is increasing and fear is palpable. Those who can afford to get out are fleeing, while those of us who stay maintain a state of constant vigilance as we pick our way through the predatory dealers, their jittery lookouts and their unpredictably aggressive clients. The crack landscape is an explosively complex knot of economic and racial inequalities that confounds efforts to pick it apart. Accordingly, political and legal interventions in the situation are so erratic as to be negligible and most media representations of it consist of simplistic morality tales couched in cops versus gangs clichés which obscure understanding.

One of the few films which has dared to wade into this perilous urban quicksand to probe beyond the regressive narratives of social order which have characterized its representation to this point is Curtis's Charm, John L'Ecuyer's first feature adapted from a story by poet Jim Carroll which premiered in the 1995 Toronto International Film Festival's Perspective Canada program. Taking his own position of a recovering addict as his point of departure, L'Ecuyer has merged the realm of subjective experience with that of objective realities of the crack epidemic to map a zone of complex symbolic structures of terror and healing. Curtis's Charm embodies this strategy from the outset in a montage of divergent imagery; archival documentary footage of Haitian voodoo trance dancers appropriated from Maya Deren's film Divine Horsemen cuts into a realist portrait of the devastated and evacuated post-industrial Toronto landscape where human bodies lie strewn on street corners and in parks as the living dead stagger past. This powerfully conjured and hard-edged juxtaposition of imagery

serves as the entry point into L'Ecuyer's hallucinatory meditation on ritual and power as enacted by his two only partly fictional lead characters.

Jim is a recovering white junkie, an educated and articulate man in his early thirties who has managed to stay clean for two years by focusing on pure thoughts and keeping to himself. On a regular outing to buy a newspaper he runs into Curtis, a buddy from his rehab days who never mastered the twelve step shuffle. Curtis is a Black man about to go over the edge and he needs Jim's help. Curtis is a bug-eyed paranoid delusional crack addict caught up in the evil voodoo-juju spell his mother-in-law has cast to destroy him. She keeps a wormy green bowl of water in her kitchen where she submerges a brass cross with some of Curtis's hair wrapped around it to make his brain burn. His wife is shapeshifting into a black rat to steal his money and his mother-in-law turns into a squirrel to stalk him wherever he goes. Curtis pleads with Jim to use his power and knowledge to create an antidote, a magic protective charm of his own.

Jim tries to shake Curtis's belief in African-Caribbean ritual with skeptical academic and rational historical explanations of European homeopathic and sympathetic magics, but Curtis's curse is not relieved. Rather, Jim is drawn beyond the surface of crack inspired hallucination into Curtis's system of faith and symbols as they manifest themselves in concrete objective reality. On a mad chase through an abandoned warehouse, Curtis and Jim stumble upon a terrifying voodoo altar of sacrifice which prompts Jim to respond to magic with magic. Convinced of the genuine power of Curtis's adversary, and now his adversary, Jim scratches out a makeshift counter-charm on a piece of paper — a star, the names of some angels and a snake that looks like a penis, all constructed magic attributed to an ancient Magus of Cyprus. Armed with his Snake Mojo, Curtis's faith in his own invincibility and freedom is falsely restored, leading him blithely to his death at the hands of a rip-off crack dealer. Unaware of Curtis's fate, Jim is satisfied that his drug-free purity and powers of representation have restored rational order until he is confronted on his regular outing to buy a newspaper with the physical presence of the snake whose magic he unwittingly summoned. The film closes with a reprise of the opening montage — a tightly woven vision of an

tory, holding her accomplice the snake.

"In that vision it is clear that the representation of himself in battle with the sorcerer is a representation never complete in itself, but openly and continuously compared with the life represented, so

urban landscape laid waste, of Haitian trance dancers

and of the mother-in-law laughing vengefully in vic-



that by this means the life as much as the representation is not only sensitized by each other's medium, but changed as well. In this way fate is levered open and it is perhaps possible to overcome misfortune. On the one hand are envy and sorcery, and we are condemned to live out our lives in such a world where inequality breeds more of the same. But on the other hand these are weapons with which that fate can be fought."1

A surface reading of Curtis's Charm places it firmly in the longstanding tradition of conjuring the subjective reality of drug experience, as demonstrated by writers like William Burroughs, Thomas de Quincey, Julian Huxley and Timothy Leary who has translated his LSD insights into cybernetic equivalents. However L'Ecuyer's film also operates on its own unique terms to examine the collapse of drug use and religious ritual into a unified hallucinatory ecstasy which possesses the doubled magical power to cause or to relieve suffering. L'Ecuyer deploys this destabilized field of power as the location where two opposed symbolic systems collide and interact; Jim's rational European perspective on magic, his skepticism towards faith, his uncritical attachment to purity and his cavalier attitude towards the power of representation are undermined and overturned by the sensual psychopoetics and physical manifestations of Curtis's African-Caribbean religious beliefs. Jim's attempts to intervene in and control those religious beliefs with his own blasphemous makeshift healing charm are fatal for Curtis, while Jim's idiosyncratic concept of doubt ends up redirected towards his sense of self and his inherited symbolic structures. The only marker of certainty that remains for him is the terrifying ecstatic power of the motherin-law's omniscient voodoo which circulates freely through reality and representation. Jim is a reluctant convert to her conjured collective consciousness.

In fusing African-Caribbean with European belief structures, Curtis's Charm explores a process of cultural hybridization which is seldom referenced or acknowledged in Canada and which Argentinian anthropologist Nestor Garcia Canclini defines broadly as including "diverse intercultural mixtures - not only the racial ones to which mestizaje tends to be limited and permiting the inclusion of the modern forms of hybridization better than does 'syncretism', a term which almost always refers to religious fusions or traditional symbolic movements."2 Probing beyond programatic attitudes of moral rectitude, L'Ecuyer approaches the reality of crack as a complex field of shifting subjective truths, social fantasies and magical imagery where competing cultural meanings recombine to produce new mysteries and enactments of power.

"Experiential appropriation... incorporates historical and social fantasy sensitive to the underground existence of forbidden images. In turning to such images, people are reflecting on their symbolic potential to fulfill hopes for release from suffering."3

Michael Taussig, Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 445.

² Nestor Garcia Canclini, Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Leaving Modernity (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1995), p. 11. ³ Taussig, op. cit., p. 367.

The ilms of Béla Tarr

David Thomas Lynch

This year's Toronto International Film Festival focussed its spotlight on Hungarian director Béla Tarr, showing six of his feature films. As part of my thesis work I watched all the films and interviewed the director about his career; my specific interest is in his most recent movie, Satantango (1994), but taken together the films trace a trajectory guided by stylistic, social and semantic changes through the last twenty years of filmmaking history. The point of this article is to introduce the films and bring up these issues.

The subject matter of Tarr's films is misery in inter-personal relationship, depicted with an unflinching intimacy; this closeness is offset by formal and structural elements that provide a distance from narratives that would otherwise seem overwhelmed by despair, and that point towards political, psychological, and metaphysical interpretations of these problems that devastate the characters. In Tarr's debut film, Family (Wasp's) Nest (1977), made independently at the age of 22, this dialectic can be seen in a crude form that is both appropriate and startling. By the time of Satantango, this dialectic

becomes a paradox; it is his most empathetic, yet most rigorously distanced film.

Family Nest, The Outsider (1980), and Prefab People (1982) share the characteristics of the "Budapest School", a group of young directors in the 70's who "struck out against the vestiges of literary and stage traditions with a group of films that employed a considerable degree of improvisation, and non-professional actors"1. Tarr's films of this period also feature such verité devices as hand-held cameras, long takes, rough editing and black-and-white stock (except for The Outsider, which is in colour). The characters are confused contemporary Hungarians, living in cramped apartments and working demeaning jobs in the city, lashing out at one another in cruelty and ignorance. The success of these first three films is, I think, directly related to the structural means Tarr uses to contextualize and distance the events he shows, avoiding the pathos and self-indulgence that similar directors (like Cassavetes, Tarr's favourite American filmmaker)2 often fall into. Of these methods, the two most important are the juxtaposition of scenes of wildly varying tone, and the generalizations



Prefab People



about society that arise from the specific characters.

Early on in Family Nest, there is a very long party scene, where the main male character is returning to his family and his wife from the army. The men play cards and mutter, the TV is always on, the room is crowded with people and thick with smoke, and the man's father makes no secret of his distaste for a Gypsy co-worker his daughter-in-law has brought home. The situation is suffocatingly banal. When the Gypsy is heading home, the husband and his brother offer to escort her; they leave and people start to clean up. Tarr cuts from this to a rape in progress; the two brothers have pushed the Gypsy woman up against a fence and are taking turns assaulting her. From the middle of this rape Tarr cuts to a later scene, where the woman is sharing a drink with her assailants in a bar later that evening. While the content of the individual scenes is highly naturalistic, and filmed in a style that avoids commenting on the action, the placing end-to-end of scenes with such discrepant emotional intensity and narrative import demands an attempt at interpretation from the audience. The Gypsy woman's hopelessness and internalization of her racial and sexual oppression are powerfully dramatized; the juxtaposition shows how easily these characters accept the absurd and cruel discontinuities of their lives.

The director is carefully in these early films to make the experiences of his characters stand in for those of the average urban Hungarian, however. He refuses to allow actions such as the one described above to be ascribed to personal eccentricity. Family Nest is preceded by a title saying that the events depicted did not happen to the family in the film, but could have; The Outsider, the story of a young, listless violinist, ends with a drunken rendition of Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsody; and Prefab People opens with a montage of married couples looking out of their apartment windows, all of them apparently the actual residents, except for the final couple whose story the rest of the film tells. This societal generalization never becomes a pessimistic determinism, though; we are meant to contrast the Gypsy's hopelessness with the resolve of the wife in the same film, who finally makes the effort and sacrifice of leaving her husband and his family for an even more uncertain life. These first three movies are harsh and unpleasant works of social criticism, preserving an analytical distance and a cer-

Ann Lloyd, ed., The Illustrated History of the Cinema (New York: Macmillan, 1986), p. 377.

Personal interview with Béla Tarr, translated by Richard Emecza, September 12, 1995; further references to this interview will be in the text.



tain hope and compassion for the characters. After *Prefab People*, Béla Tarr made a version of *Macbeth* for Hungarian TV, which he cites as preparation for the gigantic creative leap he was about to make.

These features had given him the reputation of the "young Turk of the Hungarian cinema" whose "visual trademark had become an almost defiant ugliness"4. His fourth feature, Almanac of Fall (1984), continued to outrage Hungarian audiences, but Tarr's control of mise-en-scene, cinematography, script and actors had grown exponentially, and his style had changed completely. It is as if Rossellini had made Voyage to Italy right after Rome, Open City, or if Bergman had followed Monika with Persona. In all these cases, the move is from what Noël Burch would call a representational to a presentational style⁵, where the discourse of the film is highlighted over its diegetic elements; what is astounding is Tarr's switch to this style so quickly and utterly, and his mastery of it once he tried his hand at it. At the screening of the film on September 12, he said that until this picture he had not had the confidence to break with realistic conventions in his work. This break is what gives his later films the spiritual and psychological dimensions I mentioned at the outset, as well as the political and social insight that was manifested in the earlier films.

Almanac of Fall's title points to the film's thick, romantic atmosphere of decay. It takes place entirely in the apartment of an old woman, where she lives with her son, her nurse, the nurse's lover and a lodger. Their mutual betrayals, schemes and neurotic quarrels and dialogues form the basis of the plot, with long dialogue scenes broken up by sudden outbursts of violence and eerie tableaux demonstrating the balance of power as it stands at that point. The camera work now includes slow, deliberate tracks and zooms and highly unusual set-ups, including shots from directly above or below the characters (shooting up through a glass floor as the son is beaten up by the nurse's lover); the dialogue, which had previously been improvised according to Tarr's outlines, is now deliberate and heavily weighted. I would describe the film as "theatrical" if that word didn't bring with it a negative image of staginess and exaggeration, but the effect of such techniques as the blue and red lighting that divides the characters apart from one another in many scenes is to create an artificiality that adds to the emotional impact because it is the presentation of the film (its existence as an artifice, a film) that is as emotionally weighted as its representation, its ostensible story.

This is why I disagree with Jonathan Rosenbaum (in his excellent article on Béla Tarr) in his interpreta-

tion of Fall's final scene, "when the camera, moving around a festive banquet to the strains of a Hungarian version of 'Que sera, sera', is only intermittently attentive to what the characters are doing"6. Rosenbaum suggests that this is an example of distance towards the action which borders on contempt or indifference (although he does not see this as a failing). I would prefer to compare it with the ending of Bergman's The Passion of Anna, where the reduction of the image to a pattern of emulsion suggests the effort to understand an anguish that dissolves into confusion under analysis. Like many Bergman films, Almanac is ambiguously readable as a study of interpersonal relations and as a metaphor for an individual's psychological processes; either way, it is a sharp portrait of a way of life that is wedded to its own sense of defeat and failure.

At this time Tarr read the unpublished manuscript of Satantango, László Krasznahorkai's first novel; seeing the similarity in their outlooks on life and art, they decided to collaborate on scripts.7 Before adapting the novel, they wrote and Tarr directed Damnation (1987) and City Life - The Last Boat (1989, unscreened at Festival). The former film must be counted as a fascinating failure, I think-for the first time, the sense of distance and stylistic autonomy has overwhelmed the slender storyline of an adulterer who betrays his lover and her husband, and we don't care what happens to them. In Almanac of Fall and Satantango, the minimal scope of the stories allows Tarr to let an apartment or a tiny village stand in as a microcosm, and we accept it's limits because they represent the way in which the characters understand their worlds. Damnation's style is ponderous, but the significance of its story is weightless; what's more, Tarr has not yet mastered the long-take style he will perfect in Satantango, and many of the slow tracking shots across marshes and through bars are simply tedious.

Despite its seven hour length, Satantango is never tedious. Shot (like Damnation) in black-and-white, this film takes the long-take style of such directors as Jancsò and Tarkovsky to its limits (or at least an audience's limits). A mysterious small-time crook returns to a tiny community in the Hungarian plain, having been thought dead. The people welcome him back as a saviour; exploiting the recent suicide of a young girl, he takes all their money and takes them away to what he assures them is a brighter future. Fairly little of the film's running time is taken up in advancing the plot (at a screening, the director said that if he was only interested in stories, his films would be 10 minutes long); instead, long, slow tracks often move away from or past the characters, taking in another time scale than the human one. Béla told me that there is a shifting in the film between three of these perspectives: the human

world, the animal world, and the landscape. The film's first shot is a seven minute take of cattle waking up and walking out into their fields; other shots abandon the characters to peruse the areas around them. At the same time, the extreme duration of the shots (and the whole movie) forces the audience into a certain complicity with the characters that works in a contradictory way to the "transcendant elements". We are forced to share the waiting, the expectations of the characters at the same time as these events are depicted in the least "subjective" style imaginable. In this way *Satantango* combines distance with empathy, aided in the former by a complicated chronological rearrangement of the story, and in the latter by a careful attention to the particularities of character on the part of both Tarr and his performers.

Tarr's style and choice of weighty moral themes put him in the modernist camp of filmmakers, a group that is now mostly dead, retired, or self-destructing into aphasia (see Angelopoulos's Le Regarde D'Ulysse, the modern intellectual's version of The Great Dictator), and not hip anyway. The reviews of Tarr's films in the Festival issues of Toronto papers seem to give more evidence, as if it were needed, that films that place a heavy burden of time and effort on their audiences are not wanted, at least in North America. In this climate, the making of Satantango is as futile a gesture as that of the doctor in the film, who shuts himself up in his house to write a warning to the people deceived by a false prophet. Béla Tarr himself is not concerned with such questions: when I asked him whether he considered Satantango a cul-de-sac for a particular kind of "difficult" cinema, he said that theoretical questions don't concern a craftsman like him. He has written a fourth script with Krasznahorkai which will be filmed in the Fall of 1996, so he will continue to exercise his craft, guided by beliefs that are unpopular in the era of "subject positioning". When I asked him how audiences responded to his film, he said he didn't like the term "audience", "because you could be sitting beside a university professor, or a janitor". "Does a janitor respond to the film?", I asked. "Yes, why not. He has eyes, he has a heart, he has feelings".

⁴ Graham Petrie, "Just Movies?", in New Hungarian Quarterly 26, 99 (Autumn 1985), p. 202.

³ Ervin Gyertyán, "Three Attempts at Authenticity", in *New Hungarian Quarterly* 26, 98 (Summer 1985), p. 204.

⁵ See Noël Burch, *To the Distant Observer: Form and Meaning in the Japanese Cinema* (London: Scolar Press, 1979).

⁶ Jonathan Rosenbaum, "A Bluffer's Guide to Béla Tarr", in *Placing Movies: The Practice of Film Criticism* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1995), p. 58.

An excerpt from the novel has been translated into English and published; see László Krasznahorkai, "Knowing Something (Excerpt from the novel *Satan Tango*)", trans. Eszter Molnár, in *New Hungarian Quarterly* 27, 104 (Winter 1986), pp. 64-80.





La Cérémonie:
"The Last Marxist Film" by Claude Chabrol





by Florence Jacobowitz

laude Chabrol's *La Cérémonie*, starring Sandrine Bonnaire and Isabelle Huppert opened in France on August 30 and had its North American pre-✓miere at the Toronto Film Festival. It is a tour de force, a stunning film which proves, as many of Chabrol's films do, that conventional realist entertainment can carry great political import. The ceremony referred to in the title alludes to both bourgeois formality and to its usage, in the past, as a colloquial term for capital punishment. The story, based on a Ruth Rendell mystery "A Judgement in Stone", is a narrative of class conflict and female oppression which builds to an explosive climax. A wealthy bourgeois woman, Catherine Lelièvre/Jacqueline Bisset, hires a housekeeper to take charge of the familial estate. After a short uninformative interview (the applicant Sophie's/Sandrine Bonnaire answers are abrupt, terse and not forthcoming), Mme. Lelièvre agrees to try Sophie as she is desperate to hire someone as soon as possible. Sophie meets and befriends Jeanne/Isabelle Huppert, the local "postiere" (postal worker) who, unlike Sophie, is talkative, aggressively curious and insistent. Their ensuing friendship and bond is marked by a growing articulation of a shared protest born of frustration. The women's dissatisfaction with their place in society is heightened by their proximity to the Lelièvres, and in a form of rebellion and inversion, the poor usurp power through violence and condemn the rich to death.

Chabrol states that he finds it amusing to have made the last Marxist film, given that he isn't himself a Marxist.² He also claims *La Cérémonie* (The Ceremony) to be a political film, explaining that while class struggle is not real for those in the upper class, it is perfectly real for those in the lower classes; and this struggle is not outmoded - it is current. Chabrol goes on to say that he has a preference for the victims and, in a masculinist world such as ours, women are victims.

Although Chabrol is not the first to foreground hierarchical, gendered class distinctions in our culture, the film is unusual in the way it illustrates what Roland Barthes, in his seminal book *Mythologies* (Hill and Wang, 1959), described as the naturalised myth of the bourgeoisie, which perpetuates itself as a class by marketing its aspirations of wealth and commodity comforts to the population at large, while masking the inability of the working class to ever attain these dreams. The result is an alienated, disenfranchised working class whose manufactured desires can never be realised, and who can only blame themselves for their lack of success and achievement. This sleight of hand forms the bedrock of the bourgeois social world which succeeds in propagating the myth of democratic social equality and thus avoids social revolution. It is propped up by mindless television and a culture industry which endlessly peddles the rewards of the celebrity rich and offers the alienated poor a chance to peer into their lives from a safe distance through a variety of controlled media.

Sophie, the Lelièvre's new maid, is a withdrawn character whose spare time is spent watching TV. The secret she harbours, her illiteracy, further banishes her to

¹The narrative also recalls Genet's *The Maids*. There too, two women servants re-enact a dramatic symbolic ceremony each evening, which builds towards a climax where the mistress is to be murdered.

²This is taken from the press kit prepared for the film's release in France.



M. Leièvre (Jean-Pierre Cassel) Catherine (Jacqueline Bisset) and Gilles (Valentin Merlet) settle in to enjoy Don Giovanni,

the visual world of television for entertainment and distraction. Sophie watches T.V. to pass the time, as a leisure activity, and as a means of avoiding stressful situations. When Sophie is under duress, (she encounters various incidents in the course of her employment which demand her ability to read and thus risks exposing her handicap) she retreats to her room, turns up the volume of the television set and literally drowns out the threatening outside world. When M. Lelièvre/Jean-Pierre Cassel announces her dismissal she utilizes the strategy. The programs she watches are noisy game shows or in one striking moment, when she is particularly upset, an MTV - style music video with bizarre, juvenile, singing wooden-like puppets. Observing Sophie fixated on the screen filled with these puppets is eerie and unnerving, and reminds one of the large percentage of television offerings which are equivalent to a barrage of numbing noise within a delirious alternative world. Watching Sophie watch her inferior set within the frame of her job and automated routine contexualizes her isolation and articulates the different functions television serves for different classes. The Lelièvres

watch as well but their opulent ease is reflected in their satellite dish which opens up a world of channels and choices denied people like Sophie through the regular two-channel set and snowy screen. They can indulge in rarefied high art, be it Chabrol's own Les Noces Rouges (Wedding in Blood) or an imported rendition of Mozart's Don Giovanni. (Chabrol is aware of the limits of his audience and of the way art can be drained of its political significance. The bourgeoisie manage to enjoy a film or opera which presents a biting criticism of its class.) The film's own extraordinary operatic climax set against the Lelièvres' evening 'in' at the opera, underlines the point.

Jeanne, the postal worker who befriends Sophie, relieves her profound awareness of the inequities of her world in other ways. She is obsessively in need of seeing the bourgeois world up close - of bringing the fantasies always beyond her reach closer than they are on the T.V. screen. Sophie offers Jeanne a unique opportunity by allowing her entrance into the Lelièvre home. The scene in which she indulges in her first unaccompanied tour when the family is out is striking

because Jeanne enters through the kitchen window, as if climbing through Alice's looking glass or an open T.V. screen for a virtual experience of the world held under her nose but always out of reach. Jeanne's tour of the house extends her access beyond mere vision, to include the sense of touch - a new experience henceforth denied her. She 'borrows' a copy of Céline's Voyage au bout de la Nuit (Journey to the End of Night), (foreshadowing her later appropriation of Melinda's new stereo/tape deck) so that she can share in the Lelièvres' superior empowering culture, and aggressively touches, handles and pushes aside Mme. Lelièvre's clothing, revealing her mounting suppressed anger and frustration. The key to the Lelièvre home through Sophie and the servant's back door, allows Jeanne to take her ongoing habit of opening and perusing the family's parcels and mail a step closer to a proximity she cannot tolerate ultimately.

Jeanne voices her extreme envy of the Lelièvres throughout the film, and exposes an intense fixation with the family, particularly with Catherine Lelièvre and then Melinda/Virginie Ledoyen. She sees herself as a kind of double, describing a fantasy to Sophie of both she and Mme. Lelièvre working as models in Paris in years past ("she was the blonde who got the job - they didn't pick me"). Jeanne eventually calls her a bitch and a whore, claiming intimate knowledge of her past and current activities in the gallery she runs. She despises the ease of Melinda's life, from her luxurious car to her family's support of her unwanted pregnancy. These women reflect Jeanne's own disappointments, failures and traumas and her lack of an identity to which she can relate (she describes herself to Melinda as a poet). Melinda's unwanted pregnancy reminds her of her own and of her subsequent violent physical abuse of her daughter which resulted in the child's death. Although Melinda tries to demonstrate her kindness to both Jeanne and Sophie, and distinguishes herself from what she perceives to be the "fascist" politics of the empowered class emblematized by her father, her well-meaning gestures, offered from her position of comfort and luxury, seem patronizing, disingenuous and futile from Sophie and Jeanne's point of view and are duly resented. She mouths glibly the profound deep animosity lived daily by Sophie and Jeanne. However polite, to them, the enemy remains the enemy.

Sophie's inability to read makes the entire outside social world her potential enemy, heightening the "us" against "them" mentality she perceives, and irrevocably cuts her off from a society which teaches that rewards are the result of individual ability and that knowledge is power. (Ironically, the most hated room in the house is the library, the repository of knowl-

edge, and is identified with M. Lelièvre). Sophie sees the outside world as a continuous threat and so shares nothing of her interior, subjective self. Her responses seem automated, alternating between "Je ne sais pas" (I don't know) or "j'ai compris" (I understand). Although the character says little, Bonnaire's performance speaks volumes. Sophie is aware of class distinctions and of her exclusion but it is Jeanne who declares repeatedly that she is being exploited, and helps Sophie slowly articulate her defiance. These issues are underlined in scenes where, for example, family members speak of her performance within her earshot, or in others where the Lelièvres eat their chicken dinner while Sophie sits apart in the kitchen, gnawing at the carcass. Chabrol is insistent on these details; Mme. Lelièvre's grocery order distinguishes exact portions of meat in variables of four (the number of family members) as in four chops etc. Sophie is not counted as a person in the household. The Lelièvres' interest in her welfare is ultimately self-serving. Their concern for her vision is linked to their hope that she will then learn to drive and relieve the parents of chauffeur duties. Mme. Lelièvre's understanding of Sophie's right to a day off is countered by anger expressed when Sophie leaves on a Sunday despite the unspoken expectation that Sophie will cancel her plans and work overtime willingly for Melinda's birthday party (the day which turns out to be her birthday as well). Sophie grows increasingly hostile (spurned on by Jeanne) but her brusque responses and detachment are brushed aside as is her peculiarity ("she's odd but a pearl") and her surfacing anger, noted by M. Lelièvre and Gilles/Valentin Merlet ("she's getting complacent") is equally overlooked by Mme. Lelièvre who is unwilling to lose her robot-like competent housekeeper.

The brilliance of *La Cérémonie* is evident in the film's meticulous Balzacian detailing of a tiered bourgeois world with its characteristic protocol, ceremony and rules. Isabelle Huppert compares Chabrol to an entomologist - one is positioned to observe and each scene offers clues and details which help place the eruption of violence in the operatic finale. Careful attention is paid to notating the enormous gulf that separates the worlds of each class, evident in the very different cars, homes, leisure activities, clothing and in the smallest details like Jeanne's habit of recycling her chewing gum or her bright yellow nail polish. Sophie's game shows and rock puppet videos are galaxies from the Lelièvre's refined appreciation of correct culture.

Although the narrative placement is with Jeanne and Sophie, there is also a discernible detachment, and direct identification with any character in a simple way is thwarted. In many ways the Lelièvres are the more obvious figures of identification. This is, in part,

underlined through the choice of casting; each family member is charming, attractive and considerate of one another. Catherine and Georges were both previously married and each have brought one child to the marriage, yet the rivalries or uneasiness that can arise in this situation are remarkably absent. Jeanne and Sophie, on the other hand, grow increasingly unstable, agitated and bizarre as the film progresses, which complicates the spectator's empathy with the have-nots. The film's focus, however, extends beyond the individuals; instead, its commitment is to unmasking and highlighting the unbridgeable gap that separates the empowered from the rest of society, and frustrates the less privileged classes by remaining unspoken. Chabrol, therefore, maintains a distance from the family and exposes the cracks in the Lelièvres carefully maintained facade of propriety, pointing to the narcissism and exploitation which underlies bourgeois appearance and good taste. The Lelièvre pantry is packed to capacity with an assortment of expensive foods while Jeanne's fridge is notably empty. Jeanne and Sophie share a meal of bread and found mushrooms and the Lelièvres, in a remarkable scene, are presented indulging in a ritual of shelling oysters in a manner which is almost grotesque because of the emphasis placed on the family members' deft ability to demolish the delicacies while they participate in polite dinner conversation. The most striking example of bourgeois callousness thinly reined in by social protocol is evident in the scene where M. Lelièvre interrupts Sophie watching television when he comes to fire her. He may have wellfounded reasons for terminating her position, however, his approach is to make her aware of his power by announcing, "I could throw you out tonight - we have no contract", while remaining committed to appearances, "I don't want to appear too hard so disappear in a week and don't expect a reference". The subtleties are, ironically, lost on Sophie who has tuned out to her private world of escape and distraction, essentially retaliating by reducing M. Lelièvre to T.V. snow, an irritating interference.

La Cérémonie outlines the same contradictions and inequities which mark bourgeois/working class relations in other social institutions. The church ostensibly offers the poor working class a chance at equality, dignity, salvation, and a meaningful identity through the performance of good deeds for those even needier. It offers shelter and a place of refuge from the injustices of the outside world (a sign "S.O.S. Catholique" hangs in the room in the church where the women are sorting clothes for distribution), and diversions and leisure activities through volunteer work.

Jeanne, however, soon recognizes the familiar social attitudes and power hierarchies which anger her

in the outside world, replicated within the church. The abbé is yet another controlling patriarch (Sophie compares him to her father "both smelling of piss") and the rich, upon whom the church depends, manifest their total disregard and antipathy for the disenfranchised by tossing them their unusable clothing in the form of "relief". Jeanne becomes aware of the futility of this route and the false piety at its base, and the church's inability to offer fulfillment or compassion. Jeanne and Sophie's defiance of the moral codes underlying the church is beautifully illustrated in the scene where the two women make a gift of their secrets to each other and allude to their crimes (Jeanne's abuse of her daughter which results in her death and Sophie's parricide). They explode with laughter claiming "they couldn't prove it", and then Jeanne regains her composure and states with all seriousness, "enough of that - let's go help the poor". She rejects the church ultimately, after staging a verbal protest denouncing the false ceremonies of both the 'generous' givers and the pious sorters. She is reprimanded by the abbé who is, ironically, responsible for her death (though he is immediately exonerated) when his car hits hers outside the Lelièvre home, following the massacre of the family.

The women's acts of rebellion and transgression are subtle at first, and then gain speed as their friendship solidifies. Jeanne forthrightly satisfies her thirst for access to the privileged Lelièvre world by insisting on having Catherine Lelièvre give her a ride from the train station, reading the family's mail, asking Sophie to listen in on the family's private phone conversations or returning to the house despite having been forbidden entry. Her verbal denunciations of the family become more and more frequent and barely mask her deep animosity and anger with her own lack - "I wish I had a small part of what they have - life would be different". Jeanne also protests her job as a postal worker by using her working hours to read, refusing, in one scene, to sell a woman stamps by claiming she hasn't any.

Sophie's anger and small protests are more nuanced. They are evident in her withdrawal and lack of interaction beyond the two stock phrases she reiterates. Her silences make the small confrontations all the more powerful. When M. Lelièvre questions her about Jeanne's visit to the house and expressly forbids it, she abruptly questions his decision ("She's done nothing wrong") and then breaks a plate accidentally and admonishes him "Look what you made me do". Sophie's illiteracy heightens her sense of inadequacy and leaves her without the tools to interpret the world around her. Melinda's discovery of Sophie's handicap and her offer of help is interpreted as a vital threat to Sophie because she has penetrated Sophie's guarded private world. Melinda's crime of exposing her shame



Sophie (Sandrine Bonnaire) alone in the kitchen.

and degradation and then patronising her suffering, elicits a shocking, violent response from Sophie who warns her to mind her own business, calls her a bitch and then threatens to retaliate by exposing Melinda's secret, her pregnancy, to her father. The outburst is particularly remarkable because of Sophie's characteristic silence, and hints at the turbulence too long overlooked. Jeanne sparks Sophie's defiance further ("They take us for a trash can, don't you think?") and drums her lesson ("See how they're using you?") until her willing pupil slowly articulates it back: "I won't obey". The women's steadily solidifying empowerment through friendship and love is captured in a brief moment where the two are silently watching a game show in Sophie's room with their arms protectively and lovingly around each other. At the same time, the moment is disturbing because the women are visibly disconnected from the world around them.

The final act begins with Jeanne and Sophie returning to the house to collect Sophie's belongings,

in flagrant disregard of the fact that Jeanne has been forbidden entry and the family is at home. The act builds with the tension of impending disaster. Jeanne is describing in detail the events that led to her daughter's death, after hearing of Melinda's pregnancy and of her family's support. Jeanne's revealing account of her uncontrollable rage ("I don't know what I did - I couldn't have done it...") signals the inevitability of another terrible, unavoidable explosion on a grander scale, fuelled by the resentment of both women. Soon after entry into the house, the two pick up M. Lelièvre's hunting rifles (the equipment of a privileged leisure sport foreign to Sophie and Jeanne). The counterpoint developed between Jeanne and Sophie's forthcoming hunt and bloodbath and the death of the nobleman Don Giovanni, played out in the opera the Lelièvres are enjoying, is fascinating. Mozart's Don Giovanni is a complex anti-hero. He is a powerful aristocrat who exercises his freedom and indulges his sexual desires at any cost. On the one hand, the opera's fas-

cination with Don Giovanni's promiscuity is liberating, as it challenges the codes and norms of a strict bourgeois social order. On the other hand, his indulgence is acquired at the price of exploiting those less empowered - notably women and his servant. The opera begins with Don Giovanni's servant, Leporello, complaining about his working conditions and desiring to leave his master. Don Giovanni attempt to rape Donna Anna, and one learns of his having exploited and abandoned Donna Elvira. His sexual transgressiveness, supported by the energy of the music, elicits a complicated response as it is rooted in self-serving, masculinist privilege and power. The retribution he receives finally at the hand of the symbolic Father - the "stone guest" who condemns him to death for undermining bourgeois patriarchal Law - is both overly oppressive (it secures bourgeois morality and authority) and in part, just (it speaks collectively for the victims of his pursuits who have been exploited or abused). The opera's complexity and fascination stems from these conflicting impulses. Sophie and Jeanne's terrible eruption is equally complex. They, too, seek retribution for freedoms enjoyed at their expense, but they telescope a lifetime of accumulative frustration and target a family who symbolically represent broader social conflicts, and are tragically undeserving of the women's deep unconscious rage.

Sophie and Jeanne act out a return of the repressed which has been gathering momentum, observed in all the detailed moments of frustration, shame, envy and conflict evidenced throughout the film. Because their actions lash out at social determinants which extend beyond the Lelièvres, each moment is heightened with symbolic weight. The women lack this awareness and appear increasingly detached from the reality surrounding them. En route to sharing some cocoa in Sophie's room, they stop in the master bedroom (as they did when Jeanne originally 'toured' the home). The master bedroom is the most private secretive room in the bourgeois home; not only is it the least accessible to outsiders but it is off-limits to the children of the family as well as it is a sexualized space. Jeanne's violent, hysterical outburst in the bedroom displays evidence of both child-like and adult rage. She is beyond any sense of decorum and containment - the signposts and boundaries of social behaviour - and her gestures are loaded with significance. She wields the phallic rifle she has usurped between her legs over the marital bed remarking, "They've been screwing", then smashes the photo of Catherine Lelièvre, ("Take that, bitch"), as if punishing her for the activity. She then pours cocoa between her legs all over the bed, as if pissing on the parental infidelity shamelessly displayed on their bed. Jeanne's behaviour alludes to a symbolic

mother-daughter conflict, as if Jeanne is protesting against Catherine the mother whose love and caring has been transferred from the child to the father. (Chabrol in fact makes reference to the influence of Lacan in the film's press kit where one finds the quote "Elle invective la cruauté des grandes personnes, l'insouciance des mères frivoles" - "She hurls abuse at the cruelty of grownups, the insouciance of frivolous mothers"). This rebellion against the loss of maternal (woman-identified) love and empowerment, psychoanalytically marks the unwillingness of the young girl child to become a socialized passive heterosexual. In fact two other of Isabelle Huppert's transgressive characters in earlier Chabrol films, Violette Nozierè, and Marie Latour in Une Affaire de Femmes, both allude to lesbian desires and the same refusal to relinquish women-identified love. This is further underlined through editing; Jeanne rips Catherine Lelièvre's luxurious clothing while making angry, sarcastic reference to her beauty, and the scene of Jeanne's hysteria is intercut with shots of Catherine Lelièvre's instinctive, maternal sense of foreboding and worry.

Chabrol modulates the tension of the sequence by alternating Jeanne's rages with moments of quiet marked by dramatic irony. Following the scene in the master bedroom, Jeanne and Sophie continue on to Sophie's room, passing a view of the family/T.V. room where the Lelièvres are watching the opera of Don Giovanni. The audience watches Sophie and Jeanne quietly observing the Lelièvres, unnoticed by the latter, spitting down at them before deciding to "scare" them. Georges Lelièvre is finally sent to check the house. He confronts the girls and is shot. From this point on it is clear that Jeanne and Sophie consciously decide to complete their task and kill the remaining members of the family. (Sophie not only shoots the family but continues to shoot at the books in the room, as if they, too, are her enemy). The denouement is remarkably relaxed. Jeanne's comment is a satisfied "Bon. Ça va. On a bien fait." ("We've done well"), and Sophie calmly offers to clean up and call the police after Jeanne has left.

In an earlier scene in the film, a guest at Melinda's birthday party makes reference to Nietsche and to the notion of the evil within man; the bourgeoisie thus restrict accountability, denying its complex social roots. Chabrol's film insists that morality and "evil" are socially grounded but fate can ironically and whimsically intervene. Jeanne has stolen the tape deck which was recording *Don Giovanni* and continued to include the murders. Her meaningless, accidental death (one overhears the comment, "It's clearly not your fault, father") now jeopardizes the women's reliance on "They'll never prove it". Sophie

walks past the scene as Jeanne's words "Ça va. On a bien fait" are repeated on tape.

La Cérémonie is particularly disturbing because of its alignment with Jeanne and Sophie, two women who arguably cross the border of sanity and descend into madness. Like a number of other of Chabrol's films (his collaborations with Isabelle Huppert seem exemplary, beginning with Violette Nozierè, 1978, Une Affaire de Femmes, 1988 and Madame Bovary, 1991) the protagonists are women whose desires cannot be contained or fulfilled within their ascribed social positions. Their defiance leads them to break the law, through a variety of illegal social practices. Violette successfully commits parricide, Mme. Latour is a practising abortionist (and adulteress) in a Catholic country under a wartime collaborationist government and Madame Bovary indulges in adultery as one of her attempts at escape and protest. In each work Chabrol is careful to place the victim's transgressions within a wider context - a social world which unfairly suffocates them - distinct from the individual victims of their outbursts. Violette's parents, M. Latour, Charles Bovary, and the Lelièvres are basically representative of their respective classes and social milieus, no better and no worse. They are blind to the protagonists' secret needs

and to the social inequities in which they are rooted and cannot, therefore, be held accountable as individuals for the dilemmas explored in the narratives.

The film's final ceremony, the Lelièvres' bloodstained massacre, enacted before the TV set, becomes a symbolic expiatory act, atoning for the collective sins of bourgeois society.³ The heroines of these heightened melodramas, are the few who refuse to accept their naturalised oppression, despite the high cost demanded of their transgressions. Because of the lack of social alternatives, the stakes are always the highest.

I'd like to thank Robin Wood and Richard Lippe for their helpful comments.

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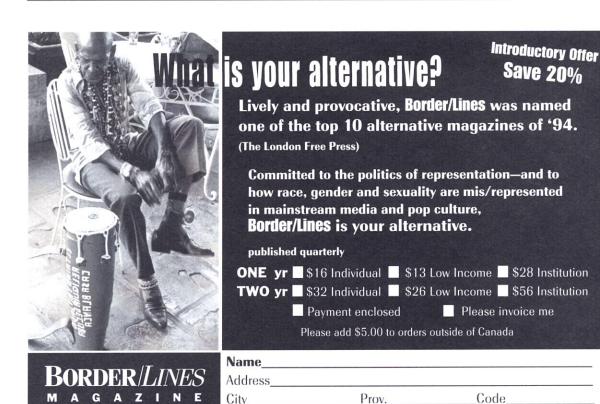
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A Haine, Fallen Angels,

and Some Thoughts on Scorsese's Children

y original intent in writing this review was to look at a single film that I saw during the Toronto Film Festival, a film which impressed me more than any other-Mathieu Kassowitz's La Haine/Hate. While it had arrived at the festival with some publicity, having won best director award at Cannes, I didn't know much about it, and had in fact toyed with the idea of not going to it, as I had just about overdosed on films by the time it was screened on the second last day of the festival. However, a friend had recommended it, having seen it at an earlier press screening, so I decided to go. There are very few films that have left me speechless—Marco Bellocchio's In the Name of the Father, Kurosawa's Kagemusha are the ones that come to mind. This film must be added to the list. At once familiar yet so different, La Haine confronts the viewer with a storyline that seems to derive from the recent spate of 'Menace II Society' -type films¹, yet the spin Kassowitz put on it moved it for me out of the more localized American black ethnic experience into the universal, an inclusionary artistic expression rather than an exclusionary one. In attempting to come to terms with the film's content and its subsequent impact on me, I realized La Haine was a film which required multiple viewings in order to tease out its complexities- a luxury not

One of the reviews for *La Haine* was titled 'Boyz 'n the Banlieue'.cf. *Sight and Sound*, November 1995.

available to me at the time of writing, as its release date in Toronto postdates my deadline. So I found myself, as with last year's discovery of Wong Kar-wai, looking for textual materials that would fill in some of the gaps.

This led me (once again) to the invaluable Film Reference Library in Toronto where, among other sources of information, I came across a French film magazine, *Premiere* (November 1995), which contained a conversation between the 27 year old Kassowitz and Emir Kusturica (co-recipient of the Cannes award) in which Kusturica mentioned to Kassowitz that one of his daughters, upon viewing *La Haine*, had called it a Parisian version of *Mean Streets* (Martin Scorsese, 1973). Kassowitz admitted that *Mean Streets* was a favorite film of his. A second reference to Scorsese's film came in an interview with the director in *Studio Cannes 95*, where Kassowitz expanded on his admiration for *Mean Streets*:

Mean Streets! I saw it when I was 12 years old. It is THE film which I would like to have made. Scorsese did it without a lot of money but it is full of inventions...Mean Streets, you watch it, you smile all the time. It is intelligent, simple, inexpensive, unpretentious, droll. A perfect film.

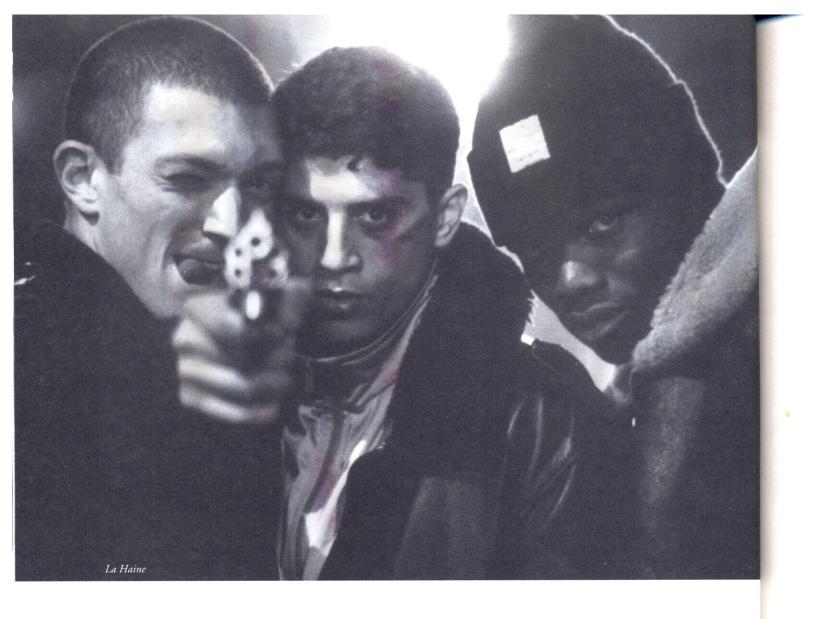
While to reduce *La Haine* to 'a Parisian version of *Mean Streets*' is to do it a gross injustice, nevertheless, this connection was ultimately intriguing. Here was a French filmmaker openly admitting an American influence, one which was not based on a superficial appropriation of American pop culture but apparently on a deeper understanding of the particular contribution made by Scorsese in his early films. In the past few years, I have noted that quite a few 'new' directors, and as with Kassowitz,not just Americans, have singled out Scorsese as a major influence. Both Wong Kar-wai and John Woo, two shining lights of contemporary Hong Kong cinema, have also referred to Scorsese with greatest admiration.

So it seemed to me that I had two possible threads to follow here: to trace the influence of Scorsese's *Mean Streets* in recent films and to represent the singular features which sets *La Haine* apart as a first rate film. This also

by Susan Morrison

Fallen Angels





led me to open up my original decision to talk about only one film from the festival, for there were a number of others I saw which are pertinent in this context.

Mean Streets

The first Scorsese film that I saw was Mean Streets. I came to it late, at the end of the seventies, catching it at a second run theatre on a double bill with Who's That Knocking at my Door (1969), which of course was chronologically first but for some reason the theatre screened it second. Since then, it has never failed to draw me into its intricately constructed and intensely felt narrative, even though I've seen it more than a dozen times under a variety of circumstances and conditions. Set in New York's Little Italy, locus for and symbol of both Catholic anguish and mafia activity, Mean Streets focuses on the relationship between Charlie/Harvey Keitel, an apparently devout young man on the make in the criminal community, and Johnny Boy/Robert De Niro, a loose cannon whose

erratic and volatile behaviour threatens to undermine Charlie's progress. Torn between a pious belief that it's his responsibility to save Johnny Boy and the realization that Johnny Boy won't let him play his saviour, Charlie is double-bound by the cross he refuses to relinquish. The film ends the only way it can, tragically, in explosive violence.

Mean Streets marked out not just a fertile physical and moral terrain which Scorsese was to revisit with Taxi Driver (1976) and Raging Bull (1980) but it also displayed stylistic innovations that have come to represent the unmistakable 'Scorsese style' - a noticeably moving fluid camera; a camera 'eye' at times neutral, at others subjective; a play on the filmic medium, in this case through the use of 'home-movie' inserts; a reliance on idiosyncratic male actors like De Niro and Keitel; a carefully selected and coded soundtrack that employed American pop music, popular Italian tunes, and Italian opera; and a near-hysterical tension lying just beneath the surface, ready to erupt at any moment.

The power of Scorsese's early films (i.e. Mean Streets to King of Comedy) lies in the way that he expanded conventional conceptions of both form and content deeply moral narratives that refused or challenged neat resolution, and a masterful visual presence that both seduced and disoriented. In addition, and in retrospect, it was the earlier films which were closest to Scorsese's own experience, connected through personal themes and the New York setting. In his later work, however, (Last Temptation of Christ excepted) meaningful content seems to have been supplanted by a more superficial subject matter, with story-telling taking precedent over meaning while visual style nevertheless remains as strong as ever. ²

Scorsese's Children: a) America

It is no doubt for these reasons that the current generation of American filmmakers who are strongly influenced by Scorsese pay homage not to the later Scorsese but to his earlier films. Spike Lee's Do The Right Thing (1989) for example, expresses what appears to be a black response to the virulently racist attitudes infecting the Italian-Americans who inhabit Scorsese's films. Here I'm thinking for example of the scene in Mean Streets where Charlie decides not to show up for a pre-arranged tryst with a black stripper...the voice-over narration reveals an inner dialogue in which he convinces himself that a relationship with a 'melangian' 3would be crazy. This appears to be directly answered throughout Do the Right Thing wherever Italian-American and black culture collide, from Pino/John Turturro's overtly racist yet blatantly ignorant belittling of black celebrities through the remarkable sequence of shots depicting a 'rainbow' of individuals hurling slang pejoratives and blame on other racial/religious/national groups.

Quentin Tarantino, the other strongly stylized American director whose work hit the screens during the last decade, also alludes to early Scorsese, from the obvious - the 'drug-buying' scene in *Pulp Fiction* which is a direct quotation of the gun-buying scene in *Taxi Driver*- to the less obvious -the 'in-joke' scene in *True Romance (1993*-written by Tarantino) where Dennis Hopper calculatingly incites Chris Walken's mafioso character to murderous rage by playing the 'melangian' card- he tells a prolonged tale whose punch line involves Walken's Sicilian ancestors tracing their lineage back to black progenitors.

Mean Streets' influence appears also and perhaps more importantly in the work of non-mainstream directors such as Nick Gomez, whose first film, Laws of Gravity (1991), referenced the earlier film in both style and content, its plot centred on a 'Charlie/Johnny Boy'-type of relationship. Another film with a comparable debt to Scorsese is Stephen Williams' Soul Survivor (1994), screened at this year's Toronto Film Festival as part of Perspective Canada. Together with

Clement Virgo's Rude, Soul Survivor represented something new for Toronto filmmaking... a storyline deriving from and set within the local Black community. Williams' film is much more straightforward filmically, less ambitious in both narrative and technique than Virgo's, perhaps one reason why it accrued less publicity and praise. However, it also seemed to me to be less pretentious, with a clearer narrative and more likable characters. In obvious homage to Scorsese, the film opens with a black screen and a male voice over narration strongly reminiscent of Charlie's speech at the beginning of Mean Streets where he talks of doing penance for his sins not in church but on the streets. Its narrative revolves around the misplaced loyalty Tyrone/Peter Williams, the film's protagonist, has for his cousin Reuben/David Smith, a Rastafarian version of Johnny Boy, a loyalty which, as in Mean Streets, leads to a violent and tragic conclusion.

b) Hong Kong

Last year's Film Festival discovery for me (and, it would seem, the rest of North America) was the Hong Kong director Wong Kar-wai, who had two films screened, a historically set costume drama, Ashes of Time (1994) and a comedy/drama, Chungking Express (1994), set in contemporary Hong Kong. In my initial research on the director, I found that his first film As Tears Go By (1989) was self-consciously based on Mean Streets. This surprised me at the time, for it seemed to me that neither Ashes of Time nor Chungking Express bore any traces of the Scorsese style or content... Wong's own style and content being extremely innovative and prominent in their own right. (What didn't surprise me

² There's a certain irony here. In researching for this piece, I reread an interview I did with Scorsese in 1986 in the course of which he addressed the difficulties of working within the system. "(The kind of pictures I make are) not going to bring in the megabucks and that's my problem, and I deal with it, you know, I keep saying to myself every time, every 20 minutes during the day, 'Ah, maybe I should make *Gremlins*.' ...And then I say, if I want to make a lot of money, I'll make a lot of money. Evidently there's something in me that doesn't get satisfied with that. And so I'm stuck." (*CineAction* no. 6 1986 p. 5)

³ 'Melangian' is a dialect form of the Italian word for eggplant-I'm assuming therefore the slang term makes reference to its shiny black colour. Interestingly enough, in a 'life-imitates-art' inversion, an Italian-Canadian friend who verified the implication of the word confided that he had never heard it used to refer to blacks before *Mean Streets*, but that, since then, has heard it used quite commonly.

⁴cf. CineAction 36, "John Woo, Wong Kar-wai and me: an Ethnographic Mediation".

⁵In a kind of ego-gratifying way, I did find it interesting that a director whose work I liked(Wong Kar-Wai) liked the work of another director whose work I liked(Scorsese). This, of course, is what engendered this piece in the first place.

was the discovery that *Mean Streets* is one of John Woo's favorite films. ⁶ There seemed to be a much closer fit between Woo's gangster plots and choreographed violence and Scorsese's films than anything I had seen by Wong. In relation to other Hong Kong directors but especially to Wong, Woo's films are more accessible to the North American viewer, less 'Chinese' and more 'American').

In an interview in the April 1995 issue of the French film magazine *Positif*, Wong Kar-wai was asked what similarities he saw between *Mean Streets* and the Hong Kong society that he documents. He answered:

I think that the Italians have much in common with the Chinese: their values, their sense of friendship, their mafia, their noodles, their mother. When I saw *Mean Streets* for the first time, it was a shock for I had the feeling that the story could have as easily taken place in Hong Kong.

This struck me as somewhat intriguing, if not downright funny, not for the first part-loyalty, male bonding, the criminal communities - which I agree are characteristic features of both Woo's films and Scorsese's, but I have not yet come across a Chinese 'gangster' film which stresses the importance of 'mother' —father, yes, but mothers,no, and noodles..well, there is that scene in Woo's *A Better Tomorrow II* (1987) where Chow Yun-fat gets upset at some members of the Mafia (this scene is set in Manhattan's Chinatown) who don't like his noodles. But there certainly is no Chinese equivalent of the honour paid by Scorsese to his mother or her meatball recipe.

When I finally got my hands on a copy of As Tears Go By, I watched it with some disappointment, for it contained little of the amazing visual and narrative originality of the later films. In pop Hong Kong fashion, Andy Lau played Charlie to Jackie Cheung's Johnny Boy, the tale set this time among the lower echelons of Hong Kong's criminal society. It was a decent enough film, but certainly nothing which pointed to the themes, visual style, and narrative peculiarities of the two 1994 films.

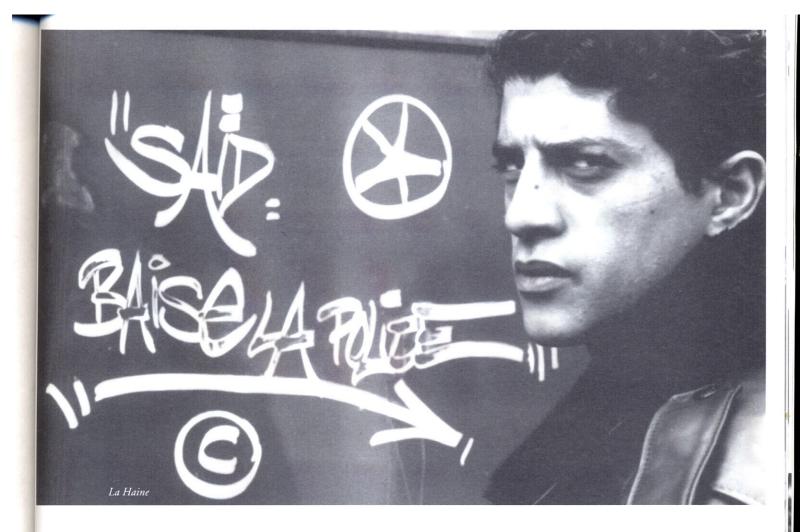
Fallen Angels (1995)

It was with great expectations, therefore, that I lined up this year for the Toronto Film Festival's world premiere screening of Wong's latest film Fallen Angels. Unlike my experience last year, the majority of the people waiting with me were Caucasians. Obviously, he had in the meantime acquired a Toronto reputation, although I am not sure how or when, given that a screening of Ashes of Time which occurred in Toronto over the past summer at a now lamentably defunct theatre played to an audience of 10. This time, however, the place was packed. As is customary at the first screening of a festival film, a section of the theatre was

roped off for 'guests'- industry people plus, if the audience is really lucky, the director and assorted actors. The programmer for the Asian Horizons part of the festival program, David Overbey, stood up at the mike to introduce the film, but much to everyone's surprise, began by introducing none other than Quentin Tarantino, whom he described as Wong's biggest fan, and whose film distribution company Rolling Thunder, had just picked up *Chungking Express* to release in the new year. Tarantino just waved from his seat, graciously giving the spotlight over to Wong, who said a few words to the audience, mostly thanking various people, and then sat down so the film could begin.

Fallen Angels is a difficult film to characterize. Wong has stated that the story was intended to be the third tale in then earlier Chungking Express, but that it was omitted as that film was long enough. While Chungking Express consisted of two stories, Fallen Angels' narrative involves three sets of 'couples', and three kinds of relationships, with some overlapping.

The first couple are 'Killer'/Leon Lai and 'Agent'/ Michelle Reis who have a professional relationship - she manages his career as a hit man. However, Agent finds herself becoming obsessed with Killer, rummaging through his rooms while he's out(somewhat reminiscent of the way Faye Wang visits Tony Leung's apartment in Chungking Express) However, this is a doomed relationship from the start—by falling in love with him, she's broken the hit man's first rule about not getting personally involved with anyone, let alone one's partner. To block any potential connection with Agent, Killer picks up a wild young thing called 'Punkie'/Karen Mok, who is willing to start up a relationship with him knowing that it's not based on love. These two couples' tales constitute the tragic aspect of the film, played out as a riff on the Hong Kong gangster-film, albeit with a somewhat more interesting plot line and, as one would expect of Wong Kar-wai, extremely heightened visual effects. (The director himself alluded to this homage in a Sight and Sound interview on the set as he was about to film one of the bloodier scenes, when he said: "Tonight I'm doing John Woo".) Meanwhile, a comedic note is interjected into the plot when another character is introduced, a young man whose name is Ho, played by the same actor, Takeshi Kaneshiro, who played Policeman #223 in Chungking Express. Ho doesn't/can't speak, the reason for this being given as his having ingested an expired can of pineapple-another cross-reference to Chungking Express. Ho doesn't have a steady job, but breaks into businesses during the night and literally forces customers to use his services, whether they be hair cutting or soft ice cream production. He becomes romantically attached to Cherry/ Charlie Young, who is desperately and as it turns out, unsuccessfully looking for an old boyfriend.



While the dialogue and voice over narration were as charming and novel as that in Chungking Express, I personally found that Fallen Angels just didn't hold together. Visual conceits such as stop-framing which had been remarkably effective in Ashes of Time were so overly stylized that those scenes came to resemble an overly ambitious music video. The soundtrack also tried too hard — a snippet of Laurie Anderson backing an emotional moment in the middle of a Chinese film can only draw attention to itself as a postmodern pastiche rather than a support to the film's mood. This is quite different from the integral use of Dinah Washington singing 'What a Difference a Day Makes' as one of the leitmotifs in ChungKing Express. One of the conventions found in the work of the major HongKong filmmakers is an aversion to explicit sexuality, and Wong's four earlier films followed this pattern. However, for some reason, he includes a scene which is repeated a number of times during the film which is intended to show Agent's frustration at her inability to fulfill her desire for Killer. Fully-dressed and stilettoheeled, Agent lies on her bed with one hand between her legs, not too high up, though, as she writhes around the bed, moaning. I'm assuming that Wong's recent fame precluded his need to sell this film on its sexual content(in the way that Scorsese, for example,

added scenes to *Who's That Knocking at My Door*), so I can only wonder at the lapse of taste at the inclusion of these embarrassing moments.

La Haine

C'est l'histoire d'un mec qui tombe d'un immeuble de cinquante étages...
A chaque étage, au fur et à mesure de sa chute, le mec n'arrête pas de se répéter:
 jusqu'ici, tout va bien,
 jusqu'ici, tout va bien,
 jusqu'ici, tout va bien...
Tout ça pour dire que l'important, c'est pas la chute, c'est l'attérrissage.⁷

What this means is that what's important isn't the fall, it's the landing.)

⁶ Taken from a December 1995 interview published in *BIZ*, an e-magazine carried by Hollywood Online where Woo was asked to name his all time favorite films and favorite directors. ⁷ (*This is about a guy who is falling down a fifty floor building. As he arrives at each level, the guy keeps repeating to himself:*

O.K. so far

O.K. so far

O.K. so far

Placed as a parable on a blank screen prior to the opening shots of La Haine, the above text serves as an allegorical frame to the powerful narrative which follows. Deliberately shot in black and white on location in a cité outside of Paris- a French planned low-cost housing development equivalent to the more familiar projects common to American big cities- La Haine chronicles a day in the life of three young inhabitants: Vinz/Vincent Cassel, a Jew; Said/Said Taghmaoui, an Arab, and Hubert/Hubert Kounde, an African. One thing that sets this film apart from its American counterparts is that the conflict expressed so vividly in the film is not interracial. Given their backgrounds, this was quite surprising. Rather, the three friends are united by their class-interest against the police. The night before the film begins, an altercation had occurred between the police and the cité's youths during which an acquaintance of theirs, Abdel Ichah, had been so severely beaten that he is near death. This information is relayed to the viewer through what appears to be newsreel footage as in a documentary, but the camera eventually comes to focus on a youth standing in the middle of the cité, his eyes shut. This is Said, who opens his eyes, and the narrative begins. Although the film begins (and ends) on Said, it is really Vinz who is the main focus. He is the one who is most consumed by hate and fury. In a riveting performance by Vincent Cassel, head shorn skin-head close, Vinz is so woundup that he can hardly stand still. Having found a cop's gun lost during the riot the night before, he swears that, if Abdel dies, he will avenge him by killing a policeman. The three friends move through the day waiting for news of Abdel's condition, hanging out in the cité, but in the late afternoon they take a train into Paris in order to collect some money from a dealer that Said knows. When the meeting turns volatile, thanks to Vinz's pulling the gun on the man, the three flee, Vinz becoming separated from the other two. Ironically it is Said and Hubert who are picked up and arrested by the police. In a harrowing scene at the police station, the two are terrorized and roughed up, their only crime being who they are, not what they did. Released too late to catch the train back to their home, Said and Hubert wander the streets, but soon find themselves again in peril, this time from a gang of skinheads who threaten to kill them. Vinz and his gun arrive just in time and the tables are turned when Vinz begins to terrorize one of the skinheads-a cameo role played by the director himself- but ends up letting him go. After a number of other incidents, they fall asleep in a modern glass-walled shopping mall, but wake up to a televised report of Abdel's death. Again, we are led to expect a final eruption on Vinz's part, but in the end, he can't do it. However, the actual ending of the

film, which includes a John Woo kind of Mexican stand-off, is unexpected and very shocking. The last shot has the camera holding on a close-up of Said's face, as he shuts his eyes tight.

This is a remarkable film in all ways. Visually compelling, with an unpredictable narrative that fascinates while it terrifies, breaking preconceived notions of what such films either do or should do, *La Haine* is nonetheless lightened by the amiable fooling around of the three young men who become real characters, not just stereotypes, for the viewer. Kassowitz has intended to make a strong statement about the French police and their response to the *cités* inhabitants (Abdel's plight derives from an actual incident), and he succeeds. It is rare to find a director so forthright in his decision to engage in the political, and to be so articulate about it. When asked whether he was worried that he might be reproached for speaking for a world which wasn't his, he replied:

"Guys who only care about their own business (s'occupent de leurs oignons) are assholes. If it is because you are not Jewish that you are not touched by Shoah, if it is because you are not black that you are not touched by racism in South Africa, I don't know what you are..At any rate, *La Haine* is not a film about the suburbs, it is a film about police blunders which concern everyone."8

At the beginning of this piece I mentioned that La Haine had been called a Parisian version of Mean Streets. In effect, neither story nor style derive from Scorsese. While there are some similarities and at least one self-conscious homage (Vinz, looking at himself in the mirror, mouths the immortal lines from Taxi Driver-Are you looking at me? rendered into French), what's more important in the long run is that Kassowitz's film shares with Scorsese's early work a power of method and economy of means put to use to tell an histoire moralisé. In these times when style and action seem to be all there is to most movies its refreshing to find a film that not only has something meaningful to say, but says it in an innovative way.

All translations from the French by the author.

⁸p. 112, Studio Cannes 95



Wim Wenders' SLisbon Story

Wenders' mapping of the late capitalist Western world (and the late capitalist cinema), Lisbon emerges as perhaps the last uncorrupted city. It is a place where, as in *The State of Things* (1982), the endangered European art film auteur might find temporary refuge before destruction at the violent hands of Hollywood. Or, as in *Lisbon Story*, it is a place where Rudiger Vogler (as itinerant sound man Phillip), reprising his 1970s role as Wenders stand-in and post-modern *flaneur*, might seek and find a form of liberating, authentic perception.



Lisbon Story begins in a car, a mode of transportation which seems uniquely unsuited to Phillip's journey: indeed, the car separates him from direct experience of the spaces through which he is travelling (he is detached from the landscape of a borderless Europe—his perception is mediated by the advanced technological form of travel) but, when it breaks down, the car also forces him to find alternative ways to reach his destination, Lisbon, where the mysterious director, Friedrich, represents the promise of creative rejuvenation which the enervated Phillip seems badly to need.

But Friedrich has vanished from his Lisbon flat, and a confused Phillip is left alone to wander the city—significantly, to wander *on foot*, so that he becomes immersed in—rather than alienated from—the urban landscape. Thus is Phillip's quest established: looking (or waiting) for Friedrich, Phillip unwittingly embarks on a neo-romantic search to renew his faith in perception, to have the world around him defamiliarized then to experience it afresh.

The narrative of *Lisbon Story* functions somewhat schematically to accommodate Phillip's simultaneously internal and external journey: sequence after sequence is designed to provide him with new sources of insight and inspiration. Thus, Phillip interacts with:



- 1) Children. Local children greet Phillip in Friedrich's flat. They are at once remarkably innocent—they show a genuine interest in Phillip and especially in the sound technology he has brought with him (through play they help restore the magical possibilities inherent in Phillip's work tools)—as well as rather knowing: they seem to know where Friedrich might be, but are also aware that the indeterminacy of Friedrich's whereabouts might be spiritually beneficial to Phillip. Most important, the children act as guides around Lisbon, and, through their enthusiasm, effectively teach Phillip how to experience the urban sights, sounds, and spaces from a fresh, new point of view.
- 2) Art/Creation. Several long scenes are devoted to Phillip watching and listening to a group of musicians practicing and perfecting its compositions. That the music is meant to accompany a film which the director has aborted underscores the significance of the group's actions—the movie is likely cancelled, but the musicians continue to work for the pure love and joy of creating. In a related way, the notes and books left behind by Friedrich puzzle Phillip but also provoke him into contemplating the everyday world in new ways, as does the silent, sepia-tinted footage which Friedrich had previously shot with a hand-cranked camera (and has now also abandoned).

Inspired by the city revealed to him by the children as well as by the power of creation demonstrated by the musicians (and by the traces of Friedrich), Phillip finds new awe and wonder while recording, with his large headset and boom microphone, in the streets of Lisbon. The film repeatedly stresses the vital thrill Phillip receives while capturing the various sounds of the city, as well as the pleasure he feels at being freed from the mechanical repetition of the job, of performing non-alienated labour.

3) Woman. The representation of the female singer is rather problematic. Similar to the trapeze artist in Wings of Desire, but with a beautiful voice to emphasize her muse-like quality, the singer becomes a projection of male desire: she is beauty and purity in multi-faceted forms: visually, spiritually, artistically; as beautiful object, soul, voice. She and Phillip speak rarely, never touch each other, seem to communicate by thoughts—and what is preserved is her essential idealness. That her function in the narrative is similar to the above noted elements—i.e. to inspire Phillip—is a regrettable symptom of the film's deficiencies: female subjectivity must be denied (or at least treated as an afterthought)—the female figure represented as a patriarchal ideal—in order that a sensitive male character might achieve a greater level of perceptual awareness.

Near the end of *Lisbon Story*, a serene Phillip finally runs up against the film's conspicuous absence, Friedrich. A self-exile hidden away in an abandoned movie theatre, Friedrich has been waging an obsessive war against a world of reified images: his ongoing project is a video cataloguing of Lisbon, of "pure" cinema, of images recorded at random by a camera strapped to one's back, hence non-anthropocentric, and uncommodified because never to be shown.

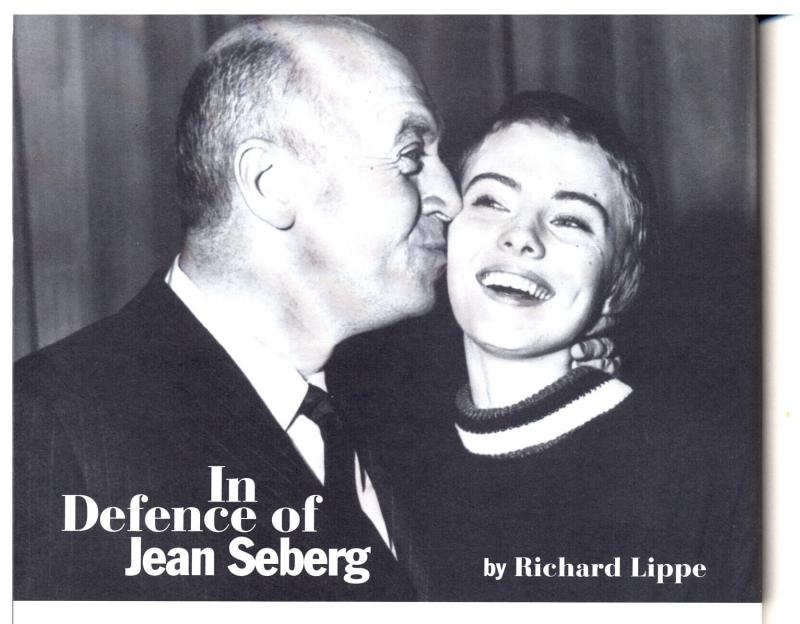
Friedrich has amassed hundreds of

cassettes, thinks of his project as the only possible redemption for a morally bankrupt cinema, and sees his method as the only way to preserve the essential uniqueness (Walter Benjamin's "aura") of the objects he records.

That Phillip so effortlessly and gently convinces Friedrich of the futility of his project, of Friedrich's duty to emerge from hiding and to create again, is not surprising given the whimsically affirmative quality which the entire film exudes. In *Lisbon Story*, critique of the dominant cinema gives way to a kind of sentimental regret: both Phillip and Friedrich share a nostalgia for a mythical moment when cinema could simply "tell" rather than "sell" stories, and when "moving pictures were just . . . moving pictures."

The film's conclusion presents, in slow motion, Wenders' romantic oppositional cinema: a disavowal of the industrial collective filmmaking process in favour of a return to basics, with a camera- and sound man, filming spontaneously in the street, filming as play, filming as intimate collaboration.

In the end, while *Lisbon Story* is probably the most pleasant Wenders film in a decade, it is also rather slight, a kind of auteur's indulgence, the work of a humanist filmmaker who, faced with an increasingly depressing world (and an equally depressing cinema), clings that much more closely to his most familiar and cherished dreams, desires, themes, and ideas.



ean Seberg was found dead in Paris, France in 1979, having taken an overdose of pills. Her death was considered a suicide although questions remained unanswered regarding the circumstances under which it occurred. Seberg was 41 when she died and had made thirty-four films in a career that began spectacularly in 1956 with her being cast by Otto Preminger in the lead role of his production of Saint Joan (1957); Preminger chose Seberg, who came from a small mid-West American town and had almost no professional experience, after conducting an international search for an actress to play the role. Seberg's other major sources of recognition were being selected by Jean-Luc Godard, on the basis of her appearance in Preminger's Bonjour Tristesse (1958), for the female lead in Breathless (1959) and, later she became the target of a smear campaign mounted by the FBI because of her involvement with the Black Panthers; the campaign culminated in the government planting a news item that she was having a baby fathered by a Black Panthers member. Although Seberg's child, which died soon after birth, wasn't black, the ordeal the FBI put her through took its toll and their harassment is cited as the reason why Seberg experienced a series of emotional and mental breakdowns which led to the suicide. Since her death, Seberg, like Marilyn Monroe (their adult lives share certain similarities), has been identified as a casualty, being the victim of Hollywood, patriarchy and the 1960s political struggles. During the 1980s, David Richards' biography Played Out (Random House, 1981) appeared, Seberg's life was the basis of a musical play and, more recently, Oliver Stone and Jodie Foster respectively announced plans to film her story. And now, in addition to Mark Rappaport's film, From the Journals of Jean Seberg, another theatrical documentary, Fosco and Donatello Dubini's Jean Seberg, American Actress, has just been released, although it wasn't screened at this year's Toronto International Film Festival.

Most North American filmgoers, myself included, know Seberg's work through a relatively small amount of films as most of her efforts were done in Europe and many of the films had little or no exposure outside festivals or the art house circuit. It is also the case that Seberg didn't work often with high profile or distinguished directors; yet, she is someone who seemed to have made a strong impression judging by the many people who claim to like her. But it is difficult, I think, to know if Seberg's current popularity is based on her status as an actress and screen presence or that of a celebrity. The issue isn't clarified in Mark Rappaport's film. Following on the critical success he had with Rock Hudson's Home Movies (1992) which features, as does his latest film, the device of having an actor pretend to be the star who is the film's subject, Rappaport uses 'Jean Seberg' to produce not only a 'fictitious autobiography' (festival programmer Kay Armatage's description of the film), but also a meditation on the film medium, film history and politics. Rappaport's films are undeniably ambitious and it is to his credit that he's attempting to reinvent the biographical documentary format, which tends to be a highly formulaic genre particularly as it has been practiced on television in recent years. But, ambition aside, I don't find the films make a particularly strong contribution to film culture. Rock Hudson's Home Movies is essentially a one point or, more precisely, one joke exercise - highly selective scenes from a number of Hudson's feature films are used to suggest that these works are signalling that the actor is gay through dialogue exchanges and/or physical behaviour. That Hudson appreciated the irony regarding his filmic status as a (hetero)sexual male icon is acknowledged by his friend Armistead Maupin in Rob Epstein's and Jeffrey Friedman's The Celluloid Closet (1995). For the contemporary viewer, the incongruity between Hudson's 'reel' and 'real' sexual orientation has a certain humorous appeal but this doesn't constitute the extent to which Hudson's filmic persona is of interest which is what Rappaport's film implies. Rock Hudson's Home Movies is clever, witty and glib; it is a film that flatters its viewers' political savvy and reinforces the perception that Hudson, like Hollywood films, shouldn't be taken seriously as his only contribution to film history has been a good laugh at the expense of a gullible and naive public.

In *Rock Hudson's Home Movies* a non-name actor is used to enact 'Rock Hudson' and directly address the viewer, providing commentary on his films and feelings about being a closet film star; in *From the Journals of Jean Seberg*, Mary Beth Hurt, a striking presence in her own right, is 'Jean Seberg'. And, in several instances, Hurt is made up to evoke Seberg — for example, at one point, she appears wearing a *New York Herald*

Tribune T-shirt as a reference to Breathless. It is possible that Rappaport intends the role playing to be a distancing device; if so, I question his motives when he has Seberg/Hurt move from her initial position of ironic commentator to an impassioned woman angrily denouncing the FBI. Rappaport manipulates the Seberg/Hurt persona so that the viewer is meant to feel by the film's conclusion that Jean Seberg has 'shared' her thoughts and feelings with us. Undoubtedly, Rappaport would claim that the film is patently acknowledging itself as a 'construction' and, besides, the viewer is sophisticated enough to know the project isn't a dramatization of any actual journal. Yet, by having Hurt blur her own presence with Seberg's, the viewer is encouraged to take what Hurt says as what Seberg would have said, but, in fact, what the viewer hears is what Rappaport wants to tell us. After all, From the Journals of Jean Seberg is produced, directed, written and edited by Mark Rappaport. It isn't that what he says about Seberg lacks a factual basis. Rather, the problem is that the film just doesn't have a lot to offer.

From the Journals of Jean Seberg divides roughly into three segments which are united through their discussions of how Seberg was exploited and/or abused by men. The first section is centred on Preminger's casting of Seberg in Saint Joan. Somewhat surprisingly, despite Preminger's notorious reputation and the highly publicized fall-out between the director and the star, the film doesn't dwell on Preminger the tyrant. Instead, with Seberg/Hurt providing the critical evaluation, the film jokingly makes fun of the actor's performance in Saint Joan. But, arguably, Seberg gives a respectable performance throughout Saint Joan and particularly so in the film's second half when she has material that is less erratic in tone and characterization. Having had Seberg/Hurt dismiss her own performance, Rappaport concentrates on the role of St. Joan and the various actresses who have attempted the role on film. He devotes an extensive amount of footage to clips of actresses performing the St. Joan role and speculates that the role is difficult if not impossible, demanding both youth and emotional maturity. On the other hand, Rappaport never raises the possibility that Shaw's conception of the material and the character might be less than satisfactory nor does he make any distinctions regarding the various film versions. Carl Dreyer's silent version, The Passion of Joan of Arc (1928), with Falconetti's acclaimed performance, is solely a dramatization of the trial. Rappaport fails to acknowledge that Dreyer's Joan and Shaw's Joan are two completely different characters: Dreyer/Falconetti emphasize Joan's spirituality; for Shaw, she was a tough and common sensical peasant. To juxtapose Seberg's performance with

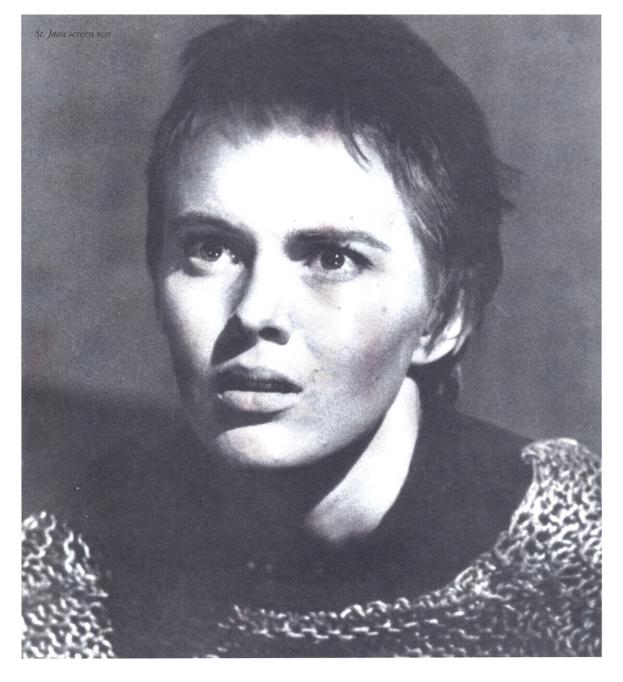
Falconetti's in order to show how far the former falls short is thoroughly disingenuous. And unfairly, Rappaport features Jane Fonda in an extract from *Klute* performing the role; in *Klute*, the <u>point</u> of the scene is that the Fonda character doesn't have the talent to be the actor she aspires to be. The filmmaker himself inadvertently acknowledges the underlying intentions of the St. Joan segment: after having Seberg/Hurt tell us that, according to Preminger's autobiography, Barbra Streisand auditioned for the role, he cuts to a shot in which Seberg is being burnt at the stake — but the shot has Streisand's head, as she sings "People", imposed on the actress's body.

Rappaport's film is constructed chronologically in regard to Seberg's professional/personal life but within that over-



riding structure he employs a free association of ideas which range from a discussion of women's images and their function in film to stylistic concerns. Following the St. Joan material, Rappaport moves on to Bonjour Tristesse, Breathless and the establishing of Seberg as a movie star. As for women's on-screen identity, the film points to the rigidity of images available, the emphasis on youth (Seberg/Hurt tells the viewer that Vanessa Redgrave because of her age is now a grotesquerie on screen) and the fact that women are invariably defined through their sexual being, sexuality, preoccupation with sex and emotionalism. Introducing film techniques, Rappaport connects women's imagery to the concept of the close-up and claims it functions to make the female actor appear to be enticing and mystifying. To anyone familiar with the predominant dictates of feminist film criticism over the years, twenty Rappaport's thesis is wellknown - in mainstream narrative cinema, a woman is an object to be looked at. Rappaport doesn't allow for the fact that the close-up is

transgressive potentially in its ability, for instance, to produce intimacy and/or identification nor does he acknowledge that context needs to be considered in how the device functions. Seberg's relationship to the close-up is, of course, a part of film history — the famous final shot of *Breathless* which has her look directly into the camera. While Rappaport says Godard was inspired to cast Seberg in his film because of *Bonjour Tristesse* he doesn't acknowledge that the final shot of Preminger's film is a close-up of Seberg's face and he also neglects to mention that Godard claims his conception of Seberg's character was based on the role she played in Preminger's film. But, then, Preminger isn't given any credit whatsoever, although he had the insight to see that Seberg had talent and potential as a film actor.



In discussing Breathless, Seberg/Hurt tells the viewer that she was the first 'modern' movie star. It can be argued that Breathless is the first modernist film, but I don't think it produced the concept of the first modern movie star (which, for that matter, Rappaport doesn't bother to define); if the concept has an origin its source would more likely be by Montgomery Clift. Seberg's designation as a movie star raises complex issues that the film only fleetingly investigates. On the one hand, it indirectly suggests that Seberg wasn't an actress by indicating that a performance can be shaped through editing, and cites the Kuleshov experiment, producing its own version of it; on the other, Rappaport has Seberg/Hurt defend herself as an actor by saying that she gave a performance in Lilith. But, obviously, Seberg's performance in Lilith doesn't exist in a vacuum - there is ample evidence in Bonjour Tristesse and Breathless alone to indicate that Seberg was, in a naturalistic performance mode, a highly talented actor. Given his handling of this issue, it appears that Rappaport himself doesn't think Seberg had a lot of talent, but (as Seberg/Hurt argues) Lilith exists to prove she could act. Instead of forcing Seberg/Hurt to grapple with the weight of negative criticism that was heaped upon her, Rappaport might have questioned what criteria critics use to evaluate film acting and why it was fashionable in the 1960s (the heyday of 'Method' acting) to denigrate Seberg's talents. In addition, and highly relevant here, Rappaport pays scant attention to Seberg's extraordinary screen presence; at most, he has Seberg/Hurt comment, with reference to a closeup in Breathless, on her ability to project in the course of a brief shot both youthful innocence and a kind of seductive mischievousness. But Rappaport doesn't really touch upon Seberg's screen presence in relation either to her strong appeal or to her ability to produce complex characterizations.

Rappaport's concerns with Seberg, Fonda and Redgrave as 1960s political activists, which occupy roughly the third section of the film, extend his feminist reading. His emphasis, however, isn't essentially on the women's respective political positions; instead, he concentrates primarily on their professional and (by extension) personal relations. With Fonda and Roger Vadim the result of their marriage/collaboration is Barbarella (1968), while Seberg and her husband, writer/director Romain Gary, produce Birds in Peru (also 1968); in both instances the women are exploited publicly, used to act out their husband's sexual fantasies. In Redgrave's case, while she didn't appear in a film in which her director husband Tony Richardson degraded her, she is shown to have been complicit, in a brief clip from Camelot (1967), in promoting and endorsing masculine, sexist fantasies. While his intentions here are well-meaning, Rappaport nevertheless manages to imply, through his choice and presentation of the extracts, that these works reflect negatively on the women as they allowed themselves to be used and made to look foolish. As for Seberg's project-choices, although she acted in the initial films by each of her three husbands, she lent her name and presence to a number of first-time efforts by directors she regarded as promising. Despite the material's potential, Rappaport's treatment of these three women as political activists quickly begins to feel like padding - particularly so with Fonda and Redgrave, as it isn't contextualized in relation to their careers.

The introduction of Romain Gary leads to another digression - Gary's claim that his father was a famous actor in the silent Russian cinema, and that this fact (or fiction) shaped his literary work and gave him a desire to become involved in filmmaking. In turn, the reference to the Russian cinema leads (in the film's free association manner) to Clint Eastwood, briefly Seberg's lover during the making of Paint Your Wagon (1969), and the male gaze and violence. Whereas Rappaport earlier indicated through the discussion of the close-up that women are looked at, here he illustrates the principle that men look, controlling the space their gaze encompasses. Presumably the demonstration is also offered as a critical reading of Eastwood's screen persona, but, if so, it doesn't provide the viewer with the basis needed to address Eastwood's complex star image. From Eastwood and his symbolic status as the Father/patriarchy there is a direct connection to Reagan and Bush, and from them to the FBI, leading us to Seberg's persecution at their hands. The opportunism of all these associative links scarcely needs comment.

Rappaport attempts to provide an ongoing feminist perspective on Seberg's life, countering the notion that the Black Panthers/FBI episode is the sole political event of consequence to her identity as a woman and actor.

But it is unfortunate that his approach is so simplistic and reductive. As Rappaport portrays Seberg's relations with men, she appears as doomed to be used. The trajectory the film sketches has her moving from playing St. Joan to her own martyrdom. But he nowhere indicates that Seberg had courage, initiative, determination; instead, she is a victim tout court, and the role is reinforced by having Seberg/Hurt repeatedly depreciate herself. From the Journals of Jean Seberg doesn't offer a strong impression of Seberg the person, or of what forces shaped her and gave direction to her life. In Played Out, Mark Richards, while acknowledging the negative effects that Seberg's various husbands and other men had on her life, also points to the tensions and contradictions caused by her mid-West upbringing and a desire, despite her own awareness that much of what had been instilled in her was oppressive, to honour her small-town heritage. In Richards' conception of Seberg's identity, she never fully abandoned the values she was raised to believe constituted a good person; as a result Seberg, as her adult life developed in an environment totally alien to that of her origins, became increasingly pressured by her attempt to reconcile the disparate elements of her socio-cultural and emotional life, split on numerous levels from the professional through the geographical to the psychological. Richards portrays Seberg as a complex and (not surprisingly) highly neurotic person. It is of course unfair to demand that Rappaport envision Seberg as Richards does, or suggest that he could have provided the amount of information and descriptive detail possible in a book; nevertheless, his film, in its account of her, seems one-dimensional and overly familiar in its version of the star-as-victim thesis.

At one point in the film, Seberg/Hurt tells the viewer that film history is, in effect, film gossip; she goes on to say film gossip refers to things such as what star was intended originally for a specific role. The notion that film gossip and history are interchangeable raises questions regarding Rappaport's attitude and intentions. To begin, does Rappaport draw a line on film 'gossip' and 'history'? Is the gossip item the FBI planted about Seberg having a baby by a Black Panthers member film history? Is the film's wild suggestion that Preminger knowingly endangered Seberg's life on the set of *Saint Joan* by allowing the fire during the burning at the stake scene to rage out of control to get publicity a part of film history? If so, does 'film history' have any significance beyond trivia games and the tabloids?

As I have said, From the Journals of Jean Seberg contains elements, i.e., the potentials inherent in montage to alter the viewer's response to a subject, which seem to be intended to indicate a concern with 'responsible' filmmaking; but at the same time, Rappaport seems to want to give the impression that his attitude towards



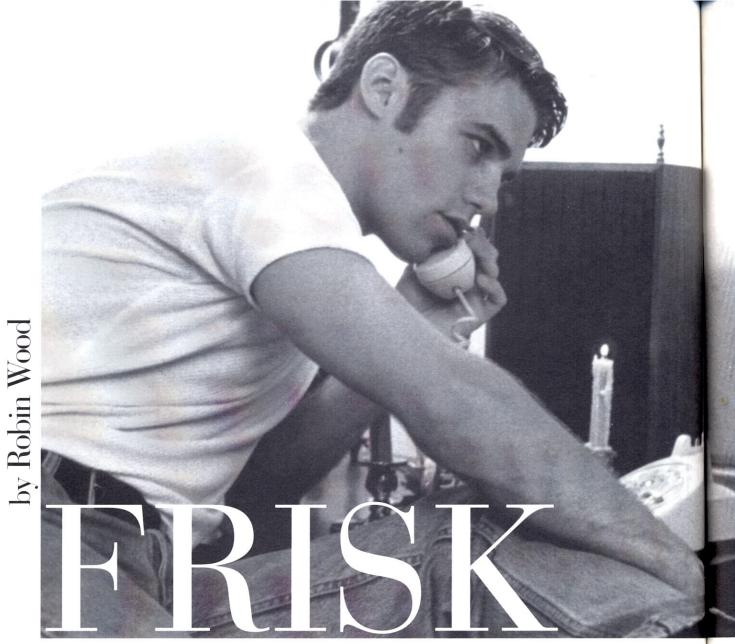
film culture isn't reverential or academic — in fact, he views it from a playful perspective. *Rock Hudson's Home Movies*, because its humour was derived mainly from a rereading of heterosexual content from a gay perspective, lent itself to the kind of bitchy humour Rappaport enjoys but, with the Seberg project, the humour plays less comfortably. It may be just that I find much of what is meant to be funny, a shot from *Barbarella* of Jane Fonda in the orgasm machine, a shot of Clint Eastwood in *Paint Your Wagon* singing or having Seberg/Hurt say she and Romain Gary were "a low-rent version of Marilyn Monroe and Arthur Miller in French and English subtitles," not particularly fresh or clever.

Beneath Rappaport's gossip-as-history attitude and playfulness, I sense he holds a certain amount of condescension towards his subject matter which on one level is, in both of the documentary films, mass culture. On the other hand, I think it is apparent that Rappaport has some affection for his star subjects and, in any case, the Hudson and Seberg works can be read as reflecting his interests in film and politics. As such, the Seberg film, in particular, with its pronounced essay format and emphasis on film stylistics can be related to Jean-Luc Godard's and Jean-Pierre Gorin's Letter to Jane (1972). But From the Journals of Jean Seberg isn't, on the other hand, as rigorous, semiologyinfluenced or theoretical as the Godard-Gorin film; it bears a stronger resemblance to another biographical documentary screened in this year's festival, Helena Solberg's Carmen Miranda: Bananas is My Business (1994). Like From the Journals of Jean Seberg, Solberg's

film is centred on a female actor whose life and career raises numerous political issues (sex-gender, class, socio-cultural, nationalism) and who, like Seberg, can be regarded as a victim. And, not only do the films share thematic concerns, Solberg, too, rejects the notion that the documentary film is an 'objective' mode; she employs direct address narration and offers her personal perceptions and feelings about the actress and gives us her reasons for making the documentary. Yet, the two films are strikingly different in their end results. Arguably, Solberg's film isn't entirely satisfying as it doesn't fully interconnect the various political and personal forces that contributed to the shaping of Carmen Miranda's life and death; but, perhaps, this occurs because Solberg's primary concern is to treat Miranda with respect and ensure her dignity as a person - Godard's and Gorin's film, too, although it is highly critical of Fonda's political image, preserves a distance between the public image and the private person. In contrast, From the Journals of Jean Seberg gives the impression that Seberg the person is secondary to the project at hand and she seems to be less a concern than the viewer's approval of the film.

As a woman and an actor, Jean Seberg deserves our attention, but Rappaport's film doesn't add significantly to the already available sources on her identity. To gain insight into Seberg's professional/personal life, Richards' *Played Out* is more useful. And, as a viewing experience, watching *Bonjour Tristesse*, *Breathless* or *Lilith* gives access to Seberg the person, the actor and the presence that *From the Journals of Jean Seberg* doesn't even approach.

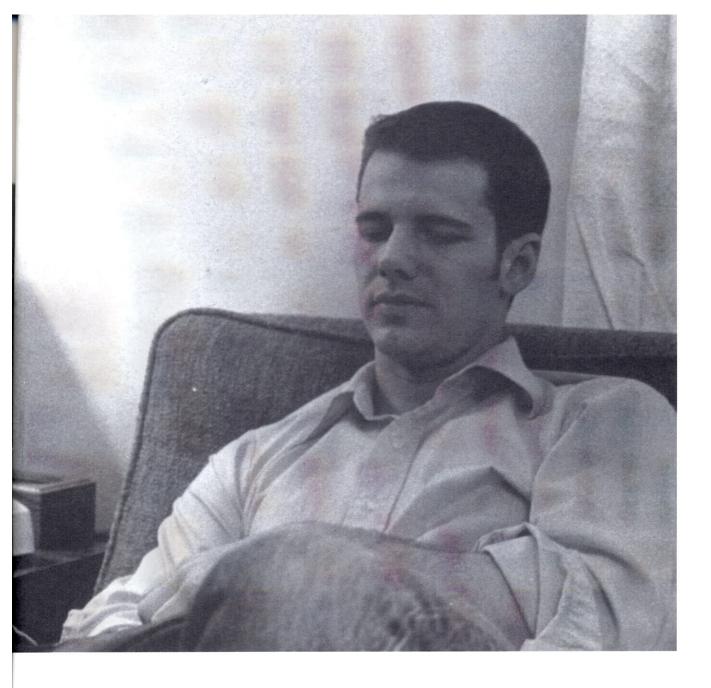




risk, clearly, presents itself as provocative and contro-✓ versial; it upset me more than any film I have seen for a great many years, perhaps because, for anyone living in Canada it cannot fail to evoke the horrors of the Bernardo/Homolka "case", with which it has so many parallels. I had diligently avoided reading the details of the Bernardo trial: I understand fully what a sociopath is, and I know what hideous and disgusting things a "human being" who has somehow been denied the crucial component of humanness - the ability to empathize with what other people are feeling, whether physically or emotionally - is capable of. And here I was, sitting in a dark theatre, being forced to confront all that I had been so studiously avoiding. I began by rejecting the experience, but have since decided that it was salutary.

S/M has recently become a prominent issue, its defenders and attackers coming increasingly into the open. The controversy the film arouses must clearly centre on S/M, and it is easy to see what battle lines will be drawn. Those who defend S/M - on the grounds that both partners agree, that rules are made and not broken, bounds carefully defined and not exceeded, that it is really a form of play - will loathe the film. The attackers - who claim that bounds can easily be exceeded, that you can't always trust the other person, that rules can be broken very easily - will welcome it with open arms; it is plainly on their side.

As reactions to the film are obviously going to be highly personal I shall state my own position. To me, S/M has always been a curious, alien phenomenon. I



have always believed that any sexual relationship, whether a lifelong commitment or a five minute 'meeting' via a 'glory hole', is centered on tenderness, a sense of common humanity with the other human being (even if, in the latter case, you don't even know what he looks like). The notion that anyone should either wish to inflict pain or have pain inflicted on him is one I have difficulty in grasping except in theory. In theory, however, I have accepted it, and have defended S/M practices on precisely the grounds set out above: I certainly don't want these things, but if others do, that's their choice and their right, so long as it's a kind of game, bounds are set, etc... To me, unlike being gay or bisexual, S/M is clearly a 'perversion' (the tenderness of the true sexual experience twisted and rechanneled into

inflicting/receiving pain - which in 'good' S/M relationships presumably culminates in mutual pleasure). But it is a perversion one must provisionally accept. In my utopia, S/M will be literally unthinkable, but my utopia is a very long (possibly infinite) distance away.

Our whole culture is geared to encourage S/M relationships: aren't they essentially an extension/parody of the traditional husband/wife roles? Competition, one-upmanship, domination and submission, the 'boss' and the 'employee', active breadwinner husband and passive housebound wife -aren't all of these examples of S/M relationships, deeply embedded in the culture? While capitalism and patriarchy remain, so will sadomasochism; it is built into the culture's very structures. Those who practice S/M are simply carrying to their

extremes (and, arguably, parodying) its worst features. We have no right to denounce it until we have transformed our civilization - and ourselves, insofar as we are all embedded in it, as to varying degrees we must be.

The task that Frisk sets itself is that of ruthlessly exposing the dangers inherent in this (I suppose) liberal position, without at any point proposing itself as a right wing diatribe that could be appropriated - at least without qualms - by, for example Jerry Falwell. For me at least, it succeeds: my readiness to defend S/M practices has received quite a blow. One of the film's main points is the escalation of sadistic desire: it can never be satisfied, and rape, torture, and murder, while still not 'enough' (they have to be endlessly repeated) are its logical end. The other main point gives the film its most poignant moments: the unreliability of 'instinctive' trust. The characterization (if indeed it can be called that) of Dennis is brilliantly perceptive: he is presented as having no discernible character whatsoever. On the surface, he is the perfect 'hunk': extremely handsome in the most conventional way, and totally devoid of personality, of any of the signs that suggest human feeling: hence, from my point of view (and I think the film's) totally unattractive, however beautiful the face and body. As pure, empty 'object of the gaze' he contrasts strongly with all the other male characters who are to varying degrees attractive precisely because they are not cast from some mould of stereotypical beauty. One can see at once how easy it is for him (given our culture's investment in appearances, in commodities) to attract his victims, and how empty and ultimately uninteresting are the conventional signifiers of 'desirability'. It is the presentation of Dennis as beautiful cipher that makes credible his victims' readiness to trust him and to give themselves to him. For the spectator, it is as impossible to feel anything for him as it is has been for the newspaper reader to feel anything for Paul Bernardo: we may tell ourselves (if we wish to) that there must be a human being buried somewhere in there, but we are never allowed to glimpse it. The film offers no equivalent for that most disturbing moment in The Texas Chainsaw Massacre where Hooper allows us a brief privileged encounter with Leatherface alone, uncertain, disturbed, lost: the hideous Leatherface becomes, for us, a human being, as Dennis (or Bernardo) never does. I am not sure if this is a strength of the film or a weakness: Is it possible, for even the most depraved and dehumanized human being, to deny (repress) his humanity altogether? Is there still a human being buried away somewhere in a Dennis, a Bernardo? Perhaps the film is right, and the answers to those two questions are, respectively yes and no. (That equally disturbing film, the original version of The Vanishing, delivers the same answers, with equal conviction).

Like The Vanishing, Frisk both raises and refuses to answer the crucial question. What produces these non-human humans? What factors (of heredity, background, upbringing, childhood abuse or trauma) deaden the capacity for empathy? One can ask again whether the refusal to answer is a strength or a weakness. Certainly, one is not asking for (and is grateful not to be offered) some glib solution such as 'He was an abused child' (weren't we all, in one way or another, given the construction of the nuclear family?). But the refusal courts the danger of implying some retrograde notion of inherent, essential evil. Hopefully audiences will take from the film the alternative implication: that we simply don't know enough yet. A more serious problem is perhaps the refusal to provide any context for S/M: I don't think the 'obvious' fact that it's a logical development out of the structures of patriarchal/capitalist culture is sufficiently accepted to be taken as a 'given', and the film's concentration on gay males carries obvious dangers of appropriation by right-wing bigots. (I personally don't see it as homophobic, and don't think it can legitimately be read that way: the touching compassionate and sympathetic presentation of Dennis's gay victims precludes it).

In the festival guidebook, Kay Armatage (in a helpful introduction to Frisk) suggests that the film allows a certain ambiguity about the killings. This may be true of Dennis Cooper's novel (which I haven't read). I don't find it so of the film. It's true that the main section is shown in flashback, as a visualization of the letter that Dennis has written to the two brothers (both of whom have been his lovers) and which they read on the train, on the way to the last (and fatal?) encounter. As a written text, this could only give us Dennis' word for what he has done, and he could be fantasizing (boasting?!). But, when it is rendered in vivid and concrete visual terms, with the other participants (victims and victimizers) embodied on screen, we no longer have the freedom to form our own visual images, which could be false, and have, I think, to take the events as 'real'. As the letter is shared, we can't even read its narrative as one character's subjective visualization, and if it were a 'lying flashback' (à la Stage Fright) this would have to be revealed. The final murder (of the younger brother, the film's most attractive and vulnerable character, after the three have enjoyed sex together) is perhaps presented as ambiguous: we are not allowed to be absolutely certain that the victim is dead. But I feel that narrative logic demands his death - the least bloody in the film, yet the most horrifying as he enters into the 'play' with complete trust, because he is genuinely in love with Dennis. His death seems a necessary climax, the culmination of all that has gone before.



The Doom Generation

by Robin Wood

t is necessary - for those of us who are not members of the 'youth' audience Gregg Araki most respects to see *The Doom Generation* a second time before passing judgment. I saw it first in the Toronto festival, and found it (of course!) very striking, but also (as have many of my generation and the generation before) nihilistic, out of control, self-indulgent, somewhat repulsive. Perhaps a person whose aesthetic ideal is represented by the music of Mozart can be forgiven for needing a little time to adjust. When I resaw it on the first day of its commercial run, I was able very swiftly to see beyond its obvious 'shock' level to the far-from-nihilistic and highly disciplined film beneath, which the surface both conceals and expresses.

As I left the theatre a middle-aged couple were huffing and puffing their way out ahead of me. 'Films like that should not be shown outside of film school,' the husband was proclaiming indignantly, his wife nodding in agreement. Then: 'That sort of thing is all the fault of Quentin Tarantino'. Unable to restrain myself (given the extreme emotional state the film had thrown me into), I informed him sternly (a) that Araki was already making movies before Tarantino started, and (b) that Tarantino has shown himself obviously incapable of making a film as intelligent and beautiful. The comparison, however, offers a useful starting-point.

I assume that the film he had in mind was *Pulp Fiction. Reservoir Dogs* maintained a certain precarious promise of intelligence and can I think be defended, but since then Tarantino and *Pulp Fiction* have become more or less synonymous, thanks partly to its inherent smartass knowingness and partly to all the hype from all our have-to-be-with-it reviewers. *Pulp Fiction* is an entirely spurious work, the product of a mind/sensibility that will probably never now transcend its adolescent immaturity, seeking at all points to involve the audience in its complacent sense of its own cleverness, its own emptiness and cynicism. Cleverness - a cerebral activity governed by a concern with what is currently 'hip' - must never be confused with intelligence.

Reviewers - mostly middle-class and middle-aged have done their best to show their readers that they do not lag behind The Doom Generation's 'hipness': of course, they know about all that. Understandably disturbed (no one is disturbed by Pulp Fiction), and needing a straw to clutch on to, they then make superior remarks about the film's pervasive references to apocalypse, seeing these not as the passionate expression of desperation but as mere pretentiousness, or worse, clichés: Oh yes, the tone suggests, with a yawn of boredom, of course we know our civilization is coming to an end, so why does this young upstart filmmaker have to burden us with that stuff all over again? The fact is, reviewers today can't recognize passion when it confronts them, and wouldn't like it if they did, interpreting it as an embarrassment that shouldn't be permitted: far better celebrate the safe hipness of Tarantino. Meanwhile, it is common knowledge that life on this planet is unlikely to sustain itself (at the present or future rate of pollution) very far into the 21st century. 'Fiddling while Rome burns' has nothing on this. But who cares, as long as you're making money.

Because Araki does not (and probably does not wish to) make overt political statements, one should certainly not assume that his films have no political meaning. Apocalypse is expressed in The Doom Generation not only in the running gag of every storekeeper charging '6.66', or in the 'Welcome to Hell' of the opening. It is there in the fleeting landscapes through which the characters pass: the clouds of grey smoke, the graveyard of wrecked cars: the destructiveness and detritus of Capitalism. Araki himself has drawn a comparison (favourable, and quite rightly) between his film and Kids. Larry Clark's kids are mainly treated as passive objects for his gaze, the gaze expressing simultaneous desire and repugnance; Araki identifies with his kids up to the hilt, without ever glamorizing or idealizing them. He knows and they know that they are living near the endpoint of the

decline of western civilization, that they have no viable future and nowhere to go (his next film is entitled *Nowhere*), but he loves them, believes in their impulses, and allows them authentically to find each other, while Clark's kids just meanly manipulate.

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Araki's gift is not only to be able to care passionately about his characters but to make us care passionately as well. Empathy/identification is not a necessary prerequisite for a film's quality, but it is certainly an aid to one's pleasure and involvement. Casino is an extremely impressive achievement, but it's not a film (I write after only one viewing, and may have to withdraw this later!) that I could ever learn to love, simply because I can't really care what happens to any of the characters (except perhaps Sharon Stone, and that's because she's Sharon Stone). I love the three central characters of The Doom Generation, and can identify with them closely, despite an age-gap of over forty years; all three seem to me very beautiful, above all Jordan/James Duval, surely one of the sweetest and most touching characters in modern cinema. I feel about the contemporary world very much as they do. The only significant difference is that they never consider the possibility of political change (a dangerous notion from which the young today are barred by the Capitalist media), a straw I still cling to with increasing desperation, and despite daily discouragement.

Araki has insisted - again, quite correctly: this is an artist who knows what he's doing - that the film is not nihilistic. Nihilism means belief in nothing: the truly nihilistic films (prominent among many others today) are Blue Velvet and Pulp Fiction. Nihilism is what Capitalism has brought us to, and a stand against it is becoming increasingly difficult, but Araki (the true rebel, unlike Lynch and Tarantino, whose alleged 'audacities' merely reinforce contemporary alienation) is exempt from it. The Doom Generation actually achieves, immediately before the climactic bloodbath, the realization of a utopian sexuality: the three characters, having progressively cast off all the bourgeois constraints and inhibitions (including, importantly, squeamishness about bodily functions), have by the end of the film not only all fallen in love with each other but are able to accept it, without jealously or possessiveness. The absurd and essentially obsolete patriarchal notion that fidelity can or should be judged in terms of sex finally disintegrates.

The culminating bloodbath (the most terrifying I have ever seen, perhaps deriving from, but outdoing, the murder at the end of *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*), whatever the narrative motivation, seems precipitated by the image of the three having sex together, two males, one female, each loving the other two: the image of the not-to-be-tolerated. The bloodbath itself

juxtaposes two images of 'America'. As a prelude to the castration and murder of Jordan, the gang of healthy all-American boys display the American flag and play the 'Stars and Stripes Forever' on a ghetto-blaster; these are presented as mere empty signifiers, drained long ago of all substance, relics of an always dubious patriotism that has lost whatever meaning it once had, reduced to a pretext for malicious violence, the mindless crushing out of any sign of new life, of the possible future toward which the film has moved. Against this is set Araki's America, exemplified by the essential purity of his three characters: Jordan White, Amy Blue, Xavier Red: a possible future whose emergence the past is committed to stamping out, an America that could have been.

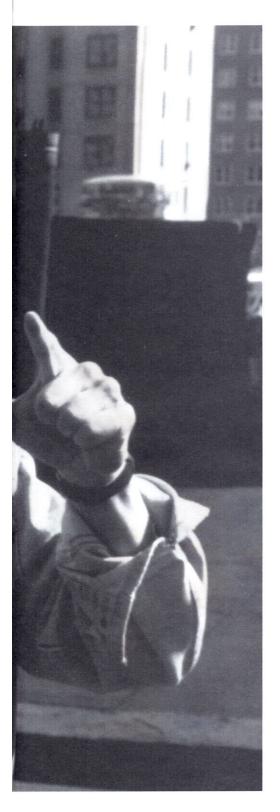
Araki's work seems to me to be - in spirit and by its nature, if not necessarily in its effect - authentically subversive. Whether a film is subversive or not depends as much on who is watching it as on who is making it. A film made for arthouse audiences, or a film made for audiences of avant-garde movies, however bold or shocking its content, is unlikely to be genuinely subversive: its imagined audience is already 'there', so who or what is being subverted? Araki is succeeding in doing what I try to do in my novels: take over the forms of popular culture, grab on to their subversive potential, and then push it further and further, so that viewers are carried along an apparently familiar road to find themselves suddenly in places they've never visited before. So we both have problems - I of publication, he of distribution. It is to be hoped that *The Doom Generation* will eventually reach its youth audience - the contemporaries of Xavier, Amy and Jordan - for whom it was intended. It is sadly ironic that it is, so far, being carefully kept from contaminating them, sealed away in film festivals and art-houses (at least here in Toronto). I shall be showing it next summer to my students, but ideally it should be drawing crowds at a 'mainstream' theatre. Certainly the film could be considered dangerous: it encourages a sense of desperation. But desperation breeds anger, and anger is what we need today.

In his interview for *CineAction* (No. 35), Araki expressed his sense of affinity, as a young independent filmmaker, with Richard Linklater. It seems, then, appropriate that my two favourite films of the past few years are *The Doom Generation* and *Before Sunrise*.





About Desolation Angels or Pack Your Bags, We're Going on an Ego Trip



by **Mickey Burns**

movie about rape from the victim's boyfriend's point of view? Written, directed and edited by a man? And screened right on the heels of the United Nation's women's conference? Okay, I confess. I went into the theatre ready to rake writer/producer/director/editor Tim McCann over the coals for his ignorant, not insightful, victim-ignoring, testosterone-laden, poor-me-white-male film. Sure enough, twenty minutes into it people started walking out. As their seats snapped up I struggled to keep my mind from completely snapping shut. I mean I was going to sit through this film damn it, if only for the satisfaction of nailing this guy in the Q & A later. (And what an embarrassment to the citizens of Toronto that proved to be. The first question to the director was; "So, who are you?")

Desolation Angels is not an egocentric film, but rather a film about egocentrism. It begins with Nick learning that his girlfriend, Mary, and his best friend, Sid, have had sex. Mary implies that she was raped, while Sid defends that it was consenting. Having heard both sides of the story, Nick still only half-believes Mary. At this point I have to say it was pretty difficult even for the audience to find Mary, played by Jennifer Thomas, believable.

For most of the film there's just a little too much lip-pursing, eyeblinking and looking off-camera to take her seriously. The only scene in which she's remotely believable is when her boyfriend Nick, played by Michael Roderick, is yelling at her and accusing her of being responsible for being raped. Roderick gives such a blistering performance that he practically hands Thomas her tears and fear on a silver platter. Any actor worth a lick will tell you it's pretty easy to cry when your scene partner's giving a brilliantly angry, ballistically in-your-face performance. It can't even be argued that Thomas's wishy-washy acting supports the idea that perhaps Mary's cry of rape was questionable, since the film itself so clearly points out that it was indeed rape.

Roderick however, as Nick, is one of the film's highlights (although just one of its many achievements). Unable to cope with the fact that his girlfriend has been raped by (or slept with) his best friend, Nick's ego (the manifestation of his insecurities trying to compensate for themselves) kicks into high gear with a destructive thirst for revenge. As the film unfolds, it's really not so much about rape, but about how Nick interprets Mary's assault as something that was done to him. This justifies his need for revenge, which really is just an outlet for the rage and fear he's too immature to process, let alone provide understanding and support for Mary.

Mary on the other hand, due to her own insecurities, fears and passive tendencies, never actually uses the word 'rape'. However, she (and the film itself) refuse to accept Nick's blame. It is no accident that Mary takes her name directly from the 'blessed virgin', leaving us to assume that she represents an angelic, non-sexual, 'immaculate' character. The film goes on to point directly to Sid's guilt in the framing of two key shots. In the first Nick is sitting on a sofa facing the camera. Beside him is a doorway to the hall. We first meet Sid as he enters this shot through the doorway. Because the shot is set up to frame Nick who is in a sitting

position, Sid is framed in a 'crotch-shot' as he enters through the doorway. Until he reaches his mark and sits down, we only see Sid from mid-thigh to just above the waist. A second shot, a little later in the film, uses the same framing technique; the film cuts to Mary sitting in a chair with Sid entering again through a doorway. While walking toward Mary, he is once again seen only from waist to thigh. (Okay, so let's get this straight. We have a potential rape victim named *Mary* and a guy who keeps showing up dick-first. Hmm.)

At every narrative turn we are faced with what Nick is going through. When Mary initially tells Nick of what happened to her, his accusing reaction is "You fucked him." Throughout the film Nick vacillates between accusing Mary and trying to exact revenge. Two thirds of the way into the film you're left thinking "Whose rape is this anyway?" Nick is so hell-bent for revenge that he completely takes ownership of what happened to Mary. It becomes something that Sid did to him, as opposed to something Sid did to Mary. Which is exactly the point. We're supposed to feel frustrated by the total focus on Nick's reactionary need for revenge. We're supposed to be asking "Hey, what about Mary, isn't this about her?" We're supposed to be feeling no satisfaction whatsoever, because there is no satisfaction in revenge. Its only point is to serve as an outlet for rage and fear.

The film ends with Mary dumping Nick because of his selfish, destructive need for revenge and his inability to 'hear' her. At this point Nick still doesn't get it and continues to believe that exacting revenge is somehow a monument to Mary and his love for her, rather than an assertion of his need to view her as his 'damaged' property. From start to finish Nick is way too egocentric and childish to ever truly support Mary. To that point, *Desolation Angels* leaves the viewer feeling confused, frustrated, unresolved and full of questions, and in that questioning hopefully trying to conjure up some answers of our own.

At this point it is of interest to look at another film about rape, *The Accused*. In an excerpt from *Backlash, The Undeclared War Against American Women*, producer of *The Accused*, Sherry Lansing, is quoted; "*The Accused* should be hailed as a breakthrough movie because it tells America a woman has the 'right' not to be raped." The author, Susan Faludi, comments;

"... it seems more reasonable that [The Accused] should be mourned as a depressing artifact of the times — because it tells us only how much ground women have already lost. By the end of the 80's, a film that simply opposed the mauling of a young woman could be passed off as a daring feminist statement." 1

Interestingly enough, it's Tim McCann who's made a daring feminist statement; by making a film about rape that exposes it for what it really is — a brutal manifestation of men's fear of, and consequently hatred toward women. The film supports the fact that misogynous behaviour will never diminish until a majority of men

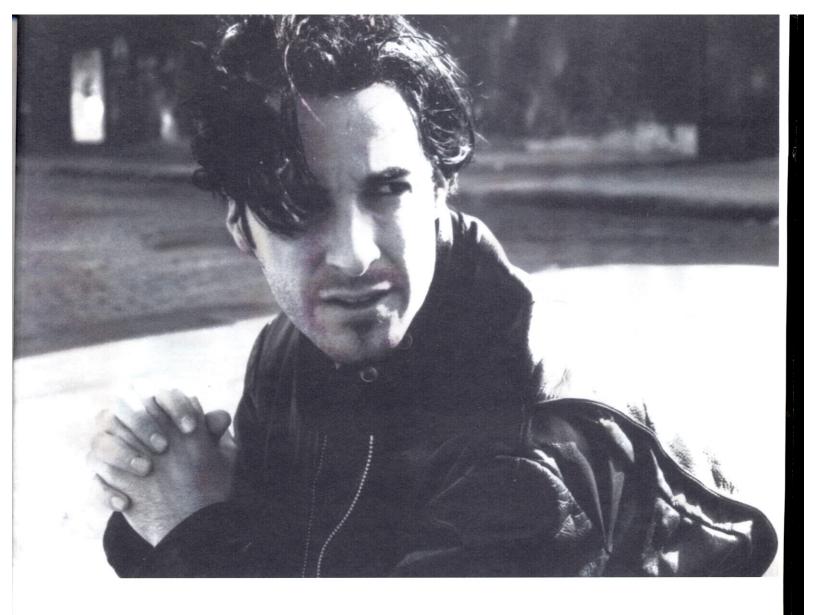
 a) are secure enough to admit that misogyny actually does exist;

- b) choose to become active in understanding and resolving the issue; and
- c) care enough about women and themselves to even get to a) and b).

It has been argued in *CineAction* by Richard Lippe² that we must be careful not to condemn all films that take hot topics and turn them into palatable (translation; less radical) entertainment for the mainstream. The argument being that films like these (example; *Philadelphia*) serve an important purpose by hopefully helping the masses reach a more enlightened view. If this is true, then it can be argued that *The Accused* was made for said audience. However, the suggestion that it enlightened the masses is questionable, as Susan Faludi further comments on *The Accused*; "Apparently many young men watching this film needed the reminder [that a woman has a right not to be raped]; they hooted and cheered the film's rape scene."

The Accused may have been seen by a mass audience, but whether they were actually 'reached' is doubtful. This is where Desolation Angels takes the intellectual high-ground, by specifically not being palatable to the masses. (Remember, even members of a festival audience found reasons to walk out.) Desolation Angels takes ten steps forward and in doing so drags the viewer at least one or two steps in a more enlightened direction. Unlike The Accused, Desolation Angels is truly a breakthrough film because it doesn't attempt to tell us anything. It can't even be bothered presenting the obvious arguments. Instead, like rape, it's messy. The film uses the act as the catalyst to a much more meaningful exploration; rape as a Men's Issue and their need to assert (and therefore feel) power, dominance and control. By not focusing on the rapist, the film forces us to see that the reason Nick has such difficulty understanding and accepting the psychology of rape is because he too wants to dominate, control and 'own' Mary. Like Sid, but on a lesser scale, Nick has a need to calm his insecurities, abate his fears of subordination, and assert control because he actually feels none.

Make no mistake about it, on every level this film is about men needing to control women. The scene in which Sid belittles and manipulates his wealthy mother for cash is superb. You end up hating this guy so much, yet can't help laughing at how transparent and ridiculously childish he is. His huge need to jockey for control is equaled only by his own immaturity. It's almost as if you're waiting for him to sit down on the floor and have a screaming, kicking, toddleresque temper tantrum. Immature Men is definitely a theme here. In fact, *Desolation Angels* is a very mature exploration of immaturity.



Aside from the story (but by no means apart from it), Desolation Angels deserves much credit from a stylistic perspective. First of all, it was screened as a blow up from 16 mm. This is where one is supposed to forgive this low-budget first feature by talking about how the grainy, less-thantechnically-perfect blow-up added to the film's sense of edginess. Sorry. I'm sure it was simply a budgetary decision as opposed to an artistic one, but given the harshness of the story, the grainy blow-up wasn't out of place. Also, the film was not scored. Once again, budgetary decision or not, it worked. And with the majority of the film relying on the master shot, the feeling of watching a documentary (real people in very real situations) prevails. At times it becomes almost too intimate. The result leaves one feeling uncomfortably intrusive.

In the end, *Desolation Angels* did what few other films at the festival did. Based on its premise

it invited pre-conceived opinions, then proceeded to lead the viewer to believe that they were actually justified in forming those preconceived notions, and then shattered it all by making the audience feel exactly the way they were supposed to feel — angry that the woman's victimization had been sidelined, exasperated at the childishness of Nick's egocentric behaviour, and desperately wanting him to 'get it', which of course he does not. As a result, *Desolation Angels* was one of two films to win this year's International Film Critics' Award for extraordinary achievement in the direction of a first feature. And as the credits rolled my male companion turned to me and said "Thank God I'm not straight."

¹ Susan Faludi, *Backlash, The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), pp. 139.

² Richard Lippe, "For Philadelphia" in *CineAction* (Toronto: August, 1994), pp. 25-28.



Unstrung Families/Unstrung Heroes: A Meditation on Life, Death, Family, and Andie MacDowell's Nail Polish

by Cory Silverberg

recently attended the unveiling of my uncle's tombstone in Toronto. Like most stages in the process of I ritual grief and mourning in the Jewish tradition, the unveiling ceremony is intended to assist the mourner in dealing with a loss by helping him or her to see the dead in a new light. In a sense, when the tombstone is unveiled it is the establishment of a new relationship with the dead. From here on in it is your responsibility to visit the dead and to be mindful of the weight of death and the importance of life. Going to an unveiling is kind of like watching a World War Two documentary, or the evening news; you don't enjoy it, but you are convinced that the experience is somehow making you stronger, more thoughtful. I've never taken much comfort from religious rituals, and my own history with Judaism has run from ambivalent to antagonistic (I was forever banned from a synagogue for messing up my Bar Mitzvah so bad that I said "shit" in front of a congregation of a couple hundred, my family included. To this day, I'm told, Rabbis warn their bar and bat mitzvah students to study hard and not "pull a Silverberg"). Yet from a psychological and spiritual perspective, there was something powerful and moving about the ceremony. What it was, was this; we were all there. Three generations of family, some of us divorced, some of us dying, some of us not speaking to the others, some of us speaking at all the wrong moments. The entire family in one place, playing out all our particular neuroses at the same time. As I said, it wasn't much fun, but it was powerful.

All of this has something to do with a movie I've been thinking about since the Toronto International Film Festival, Unstrung Heroes. Despite all its problems this film moved me in some way. It stayed with me and became something I had to mull over, like too much red meat, or a pivotal realization in therapy. But I wasn't quite sure why. Essentially, Unstrung Heroes is a flawed movie. The acting runs the gamut from painful to sit through (Andie MacDowell as Rose Lidz, the mother dying of cancer) to oddly exciting (Maury Chaykin and Michael Richards as Steven Lidz's two slightly crazy uncles, Arthur and Danny). A greater difficulty lies with a story line that is too convoluted. As the movie progresses it becomes more and more difficult to discern any coherent meaning in the film. However, this second problematic aspect to the film, which has at its core issues of family, is in fact the movie's saving grace.

To begin, I should confess a basic prejudice. I can't help seeing MacDowell in every movie as the slightly annoying woman-on-a-couch-complaining-about-garbage character that she was in sex, lies, and videotape. In an interview in Vanity Fair Diane Keaton says that Unstrung Heroes hinges on the fact that you

love this mother, that you don't want to see her die. Truth be known, I couldn't wait for her to die. As Rose, MacDowell comes across as an entirely self-centered, small-minded, vacuous character who is far too obsessed with her hands and fingernails. While all of these complaints should be tempered by the reality that she is dying of cancer, the fact remains that we do need to love this mother, and we don't, or at least I didn't. The problem is that MacDowell is unable to convince us that Rose was any less self-centered before her illness. A case in point is a pre-cancer scene between Rose and her son Steven (Nathan Watt) in Steven's bedroom on the night of his birthday. In this potentially warm and fuzzy mother/son scene, Rose seems more interested in soliciting compliments from her son ("I have beautiful hands, don't you think") than she is in celebrating their relationship. Our disdain for Rose comes not only from her personality, but also from her structural opposition to her brothers-in-law, Danny and Arthur. Michael Richards' performance as uncle Danny comes across as a slightly more quirky, and Jewish, version of Kramer from his television day job. Richards' renown for Kramer is unfortunate in a way, because I think his performance was excellent, but television makes for small minds, and it's hard for us to escape the confines it sets. Either way, Danny belongs to the ever-increasing group of lovable and offensively unrealistic psychotics found in Hollywood movies. Even more lovable, and thankfully more realistic, is Maury Chaykin as Steven's passive never-hurt-a-flytype-of-crazy uncle Arthur (for the conspiracy theory minded, note the choice of a Canadian to play the passive role). There has always been something completely enticing about Chaykin that I haven't been able to figure out. One suggestion I was given is that he always plays characters who are slightly perverse, and this alone is exciting to watch. I think that's half true. If you are open to seeing it, there is something undeniably sexual about Chaykin. However, he's also sort of a teddy bear. I think what attracts me to him is that he embodies the same sort of sexuality that our childhood teddy bears did. For those of us who had stuffed animals as children, there was something deeply sexual about feeling their cute, fuzzy, stuffed bodies beside us at night (actually in my case it was a Raggedy Ann doll, but that's a completely different story). As uncle Arthur, Chaykin is both a teacher to Steven as well as the quiet hero in his life (he is a hero for surviving in a society that is essentially rejecting of whom he is, a hero to the thousands of abandoned balls washed down the sewers, a hero to Steven for not going completely crazy and, most significantly, a hero for being the one character who is consistently available and responsive to Steven throughout the film). He's the

kind of character you'd expect in a James Brooks film. The kind of person you would probably cross the street to avoid in real life, but whom you are grateful to meet in a dark theatre. But I digress....

About half an hour into the film, it becomes clear that what is most problematic about Unstrung Heroes is that it is a movie in the midst of an identity crisis. What makes the film fascinating, however, is that it is precisely this crisis that becomes its salvation. The movie is about a mother dying of cancer, a coming of age movie about young Steven, a movie about a family torn apart (and brought back together) by death, a movie about insanity and eccentricity, a movie about a husband coming to terms with his wife's illness, a guide to the best places to collect garbage in any major city. And each story line holds our interest at least temporarily as they are enduring themes in all our lives (love, death, family, insanity, etc...). Things get difficult when the stories begin to impose themselves on one another. Keaton neither picks one line to focus on, nor does she develop any of the lines completely. And if you've become attached to one particular story line, as I did, you inevitably get pissed off.

The way in which story lines step on each others toes is perfectly illustrated in a scene where Rose is wandering around the house silently musing on her life and impending death. Both the soundtrack and MacDowell's contrived physical movements inform the viewer that this is her scene. It's the mother dying of cancer story line and it's going to be sad. Rose goes into Steven's room and in his closet discovers the box that was given to Steven by his uncle Arthur. In the coming of age story line this box has come to represent Steven's independence, his own spirit and emerging sense of agency that has started collecting memories. The box has already accrued significant meaning in this other story line as a piece of wisdom passed down from one generation to the next. The piece of wisdom is that memories are more than simple documentation. Memories are fragments of life and experience, subject to change and re-construction, and, most importantly, they are worth collecting and cherishing. At this point in the scene, when Rose discovers the box, things are still okay. I think to myself, maybe this small-minded woman will realize that her son has begun to grow beyond her. And maybe, just maybe, she can learn something from him, something about how he sees the world, about how to see things in more than just their most rudimentary form. Maybe, like Steven, she can become "the one to watch", even as she dies (for wouldn't it be wonderfully novel if we learned to watch and care for the dying rather than stuff them away in hospitals and nursing homes). Maybe this will be a movie about parents who are strong enough and

wise enough to learn from their children. All of these possibilities would be right at home in Steven's coming of age story. Unfortunately, all my hopes are dashed when she opens up a tube of lipstick Steven has collected in his box and very self-consciously begins applying the lipstick to her lips. Then she begins to cry. However, her tears are not from some epiphany about her son and the effect her death will forever have on him. She is back, immersed in her own feelings about her impending death. And we are there with her, again. Back in a story that insists on a strict separation between life and death. Even though I was crying along with her in this scene, my tears were completely unrelated, and her presence was more of an irritant to me than anything else. The problem is there are no boundaries, no respect given by the actors or the film-maker for these plot lines. It becomes too muddled and it leaves you with an uneasy, unfinished feeling. As a viewer I crave clarity. If I'm going to cry (and I did, incessantly) I want to at least know which story I am crying about. That is not too much to ask, is it? Actually, it is. For, if I leave all the flaws of the movie behind, and break out of my simplistic, one-track, television-soaked mind, it occurs to me that there is something horribly accurate and familiar about this dilemma. For this muddledness, this lack of boundaries, is precisely how families are. Families don't wait for each member to be ready and prepared before they move. Tragedy strikes, minor or major, without any votes being taken. This is one of the things that makes family such an immense source of pain, anger, and neuroses in our lives. We don't wait for one another and ultimately there isn't a great deal of coherent logic to the whole mess anyway. Family (however we define it) is very much a series of converging and diverging plot lines, from which we seem to be forever trying to untangle ourselves. And it occurs to me that Unstrung Heroes is a perfect document to this reality.

This reality involves the recognition of the sometimes anarchistic nature of Family and the emotions contained within it. Movies are usually comforting because you can walk away from them, analyze them, deconstruct them to bits, and eventually come up with a simple idea to explain what happened. We are not usually afraid to look for meaning in movies. I think that many of us shy away from seeing the true meaning of our family for fear of what we might discover about them and about ourselves. Of course the problem is you can't really walk away from your family. Even if you can physically remove yourself, they tend to follow you in your mind. And it is tragic that for many of us our ability to find clarity or meaning in our family, our willingness to see them for who they are, often occurs only when they have left us for good.



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